Communicating with, through, and as the Recipient: Changing the Rules in Strategic Communication and Journalism

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EDITORIAL

Challenges and trends for the communication of tomorrow

Alexander Godulla, Sabrina Doberts, Carolina Müller, Hannah Ötting

What is a rule? A look at the Cambridge Dictionary reveals, it is "an accepted principle or instruction that states the way things are or should be done, and tells you what you are allowed or are not allowed to do". Put simply, it defines how to behave correctly within a certain system. In everyday life, we are constantly confronted with such rules. Thanks to them, we know when we can cross a street safely, how not to accidentally offend the person we are talking to, what to wear to which occasion and more. In other words, rules are helpers thanks to which we are less at the mercy of stress.

Of course, there are also rules in the context of work, which brings us to the specific topic of this book. Here, we want to discuss some of the problems that companies and media organizations have to solve in their communicative activities. Otherwise, there is a risk of dissatisfied stakeholders, communicative crises or loss of credibility. But what happens when the supposedly safe rules change gradually or rapidly? How should people in communication professions deal with the fact that innovations and crises sometimes require radically new solutions from them? Where is the change particularly pronounced, how can it be countered? In a total of six contributions, we want to analyse particularly urgent areas where the rules of the game are currently being redefined. We devote ourselves to topics such as resilience, dialogue orientation, corporate podcasts and corporate social listening, prosuming or even the use of artificial intelligence. Thereby, all contributions can be divided into three different perspectives on communication: some demonstrate changes in communication with recipients, while others show new ways of communicating through or even as recipients.

Not only strategic communication and journalism (both of which this book is about) are subjects to constant changes due to digitalisation. Instead, it also applies to teaching and learning at universities. All the research projects presented here are the result of an intensive year of academic work by students of the Leipzig Master‘s programmes Communication Management and Global Mass Communication. The students networked intensively with each other to search for questions that could significantly shape the communication professions of tomorrow. However, all this was overshadowed by the Covid-19 pandemic, forcing all participants to be very flexible. Only the final session could take place in person at a park in Leipzig. All other seminar sessions took place on Zoom, which demanded a lot of commitment and discipline from all participants.

Together, in the digital learning environment, project ideas were pitched, scientific posters were presented, initial results were discussed, abstracts were reviewed and even an international conference was organised. Working closely alongside and with each other, all participants learned a lot not only about their research projects themselves, but also about the meta-problem of communication in a hitherto unfamiliar and initially also unwanted environment. Last but not least, we talked a lot about how we as a large team cannot only achieve good results in such a situation, but also work on our projects with heart and soul. We would now like to briefly present the results.

The first paper by Hanna Ahrenberg, Michael Bausch, Julian Reitner, Laura Steglich, Eszter Számadó, and Elias Weber focuses on communicating with the recipient and is based on the concept of resilience as a foundation for coping with the demands of today‘s dynamic and unpredictable VUCA world. Using semi-structured interviews with internal communication experts from international technology companies, the authors examine the contribution of internal communication as a management function to build and strengthen individual resilience. They argue that internal communication plays a bridging role between the individual and organizational level and can create value as an intangible success factor by supporting core processes. To demonstrate the contribution of internal communication to corporate resilience management, the authors develop a framework and provide insights into the concrete implementation of resilience-promoting potentials in the practice. Finally, they advocate for a realignment of internal communication resulting from the new understanding of employees.

This is followed by a contribution by Gina Flemming, Hanna Jonas, Wibke Kroll, Josephine Michl, and Milo Hannah Tetzel, who examine the extent to which the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, as a non-self-inflicted crisis, are changing the external social media communication of the German mobility companies Lufthansa, Deutsche Bahn, and Flixbus on Facebook and Twitter. As a theoretical basis for their work, the authors address findings on crisis communication, issue management, social media communication, and dialogue communication to investigate how communication with recipients has changed. In addition to the change in tone, form and content of the companies‘ posts, the paper also looks at the changes in dialog communication with customers. To do so, the authors use a content analysis to compare corporate communications before and during the pandemic and outline several key aspects related to dealing with external crises and the general use of social media platforms to strengthen symmetric communication.

The following paper by Sabrina Doberts, Carolina Müller, Lea Rostek, Ann-Kathrin Scheper, Pia Widulle and Neele Penelope Zettl also investigates how companies communicate with recipients. The authors focus on corporate podcasts, meaning audio files published by companies. Arguing that a strategic approach enables companies to use podcasts as a tool to strengthen stakeholder relations, they examine the extent to which corporate podcasts are implemented strategically in the external corporate communication of Germany‘s highest-revenue companies. To this end, the authors transfer the four phases of the management process, namely situation analysis, planning, implementation, and control, to the podcast production process, so-called podcasting. The results of the qualitative expert interviews reveal that the medium‘s implementation along the lines of strategic communication management still needs to be developed further. Experience is still being gathered due to the novelty of using the medium for organizational purposes.

Journalism communicates information on developments within societies to recipients. As Artificial Intelligence (AI) is playing an increasingly important role in journalism, Laila Granderath, Julia Grobb, Marleen Heimann, Fabian Klaproth, and Hannah Ötting investigate the opportunities and risks of said AI-implementation in political journalism. The focus is placed on the implementation in Germany and the U.S., as the countries have emerged as forerunners in the use of AI in several sub-sectors of reporting. By conducting eleven interviews with experts working in the journalistic field, the authors are able to evaluate scopes, contexts, opportunities as well as risks of the technologies and identify varying strategies of AI implementation. Based on the finding that AI can free journalists from routine tasks, which could in turn increase the qualitative standard of political journalism, the authors suggest directions for future research and journalism practice. However, they emphasize that all of this needs to be done while keeping the ethical concerns arising in the context of AI-implementation in mind.

In the subsequent paper, the emphasis is on communication through the recipient. Niklas Feierabend, Anna Fischer, Sara Fuchs, Christine Krakau, Hannah Kurtze, and Robin Wassermann strive to identify the potential of internal corporate Social Listening (CSL) as a form of listening on internal social networks for corporate communications. By conducting qualitative, semi-structured interviews, the authors focus specifically on the internal CSL of corporate groups and affiliated subsidiaries with a branch office in Germany. Based on the interviews, they explore how the concept is used in corporate communication, to what extent it is integrated into the respective communication strategy and which strengths and weaknesses it offers for corporate communication. The authors were able to find that internal CSL seems to be able to contribute to corporate value creation. Since this potential has not yet been fully exploited, the authors conclude with recommendations for future practice in order to create the basis for a trusting and dialogic internal communication culture.

The book concludes with a contribution by Larissa Benz, Björn Borchardt, Tim Klute, Johanna Mirea, Tabea Sickert, and Caroline Siegel who analyze how to communicate with and as recipients by examining the extent to which communication experts of shared mobility companies use prosumers for strategic corporate communication. Prosumers are a group of stakeholders who not only consume a product or service, but are actively involved in the value chain. Using guided expert interviews, the authors are able to generate insights into the utilized tools and channels, requirements as well as existing standardized processes with regard to communication with and via prosumers. According to the results, prosumers are being used in the strategic communication of shared mobility companies, however, their potential has not yet been sufficiently exploited. Thus far, the measures used in dealing with prosumers do not differ from those used for other multipliers. Finally, the authors conclude that greater professionalization of the practice would strengthen stakeholder loyalty and thus ensure long-term corporate success.

We are excited to see how the challenges and trends we identified will continue to play a role in the future and how our findings and implications might contribute to shaping the communication of tomorrow.

MASTERS OF RESILIENCE

The Impact of Internal Communication in International Technology Companies

Hanna Ahrenberg, Michael Bausch, Julian Reitner, Laura Steglich, Eszter Számadó, Elias Weber

Abstract

Today's dynamic and unpredictable VUCA world raises the question of how organizations can react to sudden changes in the most resilient way. This paper examines the contribution of internal communication as a management function to building individual resilience and its impact on the organizational level. The literature review reveals a prevailing theoretical focus within the current state of research, further entailing a lack of empirical work on the contribution of internal communication to strengthening resilience. In order to fill this gap, twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with internal communication experts from international technology companies. The findings confirm the contribution of internal communication to value creation by building resilience potential as an intangible success factor in an increasingly volatile market. Additionally, hypotheses for further quantitative testing are provided. The associated new understanding of the role of employees calls for a reorientation of internal communication itself.

Keywords: resilience, internal communication, agility, VUCA world, value creation

1 Introduction

Although the world has become increasingly prosperous and peaceful in recent years, it has also become more complex, fast-moving, and threatening. The immense speed of ecological and societal developments stresses and overwhelms people and organizations, it makes long-term planning impossible and demands decisions in a rush. A recent WHO-led study points out that more than 264 million people worldwide suffer from depression (GBD 2017 Disease and Injury Incidence and Prevalence Collaborators, 2018, p. 1817).

The strained mental health of employees forces companies to make themselves and their staff members more resilient. The concept of resilience is a promising starting point for coping with the high demands of a constantly changing environment (Luthans, 2002, p. 706) and thereby for protecting mental health. Resilience, on the organizational level, describes the capacity of a company to maintain its ability to act under crisis conditions (Seville et al., 2008, p. 18). In this context, internal communication (IC) makes a contribution to value creation by supporting a company‘s core processes and therefore strengthening the resilience of its employees (Kim, 2020). Due to the increased contribution of IC to value creation, Buchholz and Knorre (2012) suggest an approach that places IC closer to top management (p. 83). Another important factor is the changing role of employees: On the one hand, they are a valuable and scarce resource and, on the other hand, they can play a decisive role in shaping the corporate culture through digitized communication channels.

The link between resilient employees and organizational resilience has not yet been researched extensively. This paper, therefore, focuses on this connection, with IC as an intermediary. Due to the lack of previous research, the topic requires a qualitative-explorative approach, whose interest is the contribution of internal communication as a management function to (organizational and individual) resilience.

To this end, technology companies are to be examined, as they play a pioneering role concerning agile working and digitalization.

Within the given paper, firstly, a systematic and interdisciplinary literature review in communication science, economics, and psychology provides a comprehensive understanding of resilience and its dimensions. Secondly, the results of twelve semi-structured in-depth interviews with IC managers of international technology companies fill the prevailing theoretical focus of resilience research with insights from practice. Subsequently, the research questions are answered, hypotheses are derived and a framework is then developed from these results. Finally, an outlook for further research and a practical application is provided.

2 Literature Review

The question of how organizations can successfully deal with complex, unpredictable, dynamic, and constantly changing environments — described today as a VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity) world (Mack, Khare, Krämer, & Burgartz, 2016, p. 3) — has been a prevailing topic both in industry and academia for decades. A concept that was looked at closer in this context, e. g. by Dühring and Zerfass (2021), is agility, meaning that organizations become significantly more flexible, faster, and responsive (Sherehiy, Karwowski, & Layer, 2007, pp. 456–457) by establishing new ways of planning, organizing, and stakeholder interaction (Dühring & Zerfass, 2021, p. 93). In the context of this paper the concept of resilience, i. e. the ability to or the process of reintegrating or “bouncing back” from disruptions in life (Buzzanell, 2010, p. 1; Richardson, 2002, p. 309) will be surveyed closer.

2.1 The Concept of Resilience in Business Research

According to Sutcliffe and Vogus (2003), resilience can be examined on the individual (employee), group (team) or organizational level (p. 95; see also Ma, Xiao, & Yin, 2018). This paper focuses on the individual level, i. e. the condition arising from the interaction of internal (psychological) and external (contextual) factors that makes the successful handling of challenging situations possible (Luthans, Vogelgesang, & Lester, 2006, p. 28). Moreover, the capacity of an organization to maintain its ability to act and thereby survive in the face of a crisis (Seville et al., 2008, p. 18) will be studied on an organizational level.

Since today's volatile working environment causes special requirements for employees and can have a negative impact on their mental health (Kestel, 2019, para. 2), individual resilience is a suitable starting point to successfully cope with high loads of stress in the context of significant change and adversity (Luthans, 2002, p. 706) and thereby protect mental stability. The organizational ability to adapt quickly and successfully to constantly changing requirements and to manage uncertainty (Lee, Vargo, & Seville, 2013, pp. 29–30) presupposes that companies have to increasingly align their management activities with making an organization more resilient. In doing so, they aim to secure the future of the company and to be able to create value for their stakeholders (Buchholz & Knorre, 2012, p. 3).

Coutu (2002) and Kim (2020) point towards an interplay of resilience on the individual and organizational level, going so far as to suggest a mutual dependence of the two. The researchers propose that employee capabilities and their individual resilience contribute decisively to the resilience of an organization (p. 46; p. 47). For this reason, companies have to develop structures in which the individual resilience of managers and employees can flourish (Wellensiek, 2017, p. 12). By doing so, the resilience of an organization under VUCA conditions shall be maintained or increased.

Further, Buchholz and Knorre (2019) point out that one of the factors making it possible for organizations to survive and sometimes even gain strength from crises is their agility (p. XIII). In that sense, this paper takes the considerations of Dühring and Zerfass (2021) — who state that communication departments need to adapt their own structures and processes in order to become more agile, as well as to enhance organizational agility by enabling other departments, and to communicate the agile transformation of their organization both internally and externally (p. 93) — as an important prerequisite for a company to become resilient. The topic of diversity[1] is also considered as a characteristic of resilient organizations here, as a diverse workforce with a heterogeneous (personal) background can contribute to an increasing agility of companies (Buchholz & Knorre, 2012, p. 7).

As mentioned above, academic works that show that the resilience of employees contributes decisively to the resilience of an organization already exist (e. g. Coutu, 2002; Kim, 2020). However, within said field of research, a literature review of 58 peer-reviewed English-language scientific journal articles from the EBSCOhost database collection in psychology, communication, and economic sciences from the last five years (start: January 01, 2016) regarding the resilience of organizations showed, that studies on the level of entire organizations or considering employees as individuals prevail.

One aspect that is examined at the overall organizational level is the influence of the organizational structure (Al-Atwi, Amankwah-Amoahm, & Khan, 2021; Klimek, Varga, Jovanovic, & Székely, 2019). Also, the importance of the corporate culture (Black & La Venture, 2018), and more precisely the learning or failure culture (Anderson-Fletcher, Vera, & Abbott, 2017), where empowerment plays an important role (Brandhorst, 2018), or also generally anchoring resilience in the culture are considered (Harrison et al., 2017). In addition, the role of leadership (Teo, Lee, & Lim, 2017) and required technologies, which also enable the requisite of agility through information exchange and collaboration (Kogenhop, 2020), are further topics addressed in this context.

[1] Definitions of diversity focus on various dimensions, such as gender, age, ethnicity, nationality, education, or work status (Podsiadlowski, Groeschke, Kogler, Springer, & van der Zee, 2012, p. 160). Kreitz (2008) subsumed all these points under the definition of diversity as "any significant difference that distinguishes one individual from another" (p. 102).

In terms of employee resilience, moreover, the concept of well-being (Prime, Wade, & Browne, 2020) comes into discussion, as does the influence of (private) relationships (Beckman & Stanko, 2020).

It is pointed out here that the boundary between work and home is becoming increasingly fluid making private aspects become decisive for the resilience of the individual. Furthermore, Pelser, Bosch, and Schurink (2016) take a closer look at how employees deal with emotionality (e.g. in times of crisis), concluding that "technostress", i.e. the increased use of new technology, can have a negative impact upon individual resilience too (Carlotto, Wendt, & Jones, 2017).

However, the literature review shows that mostly human resource actions are considered in greater detail to link employee resilience and organizational resilience (Wilson, 2016). Khan et al. (2019) for example, address various human resource practices that support employee resilience, such as an inclusive and diverse workplace design. Positive influences of the inclusion of external coaches to build a learning culture within an organization is also pointed out (Wilson & Lawton-Smith, 2016).

Buzzanell (2010) argues that human resilience is constituted through communicative processes (p. 9). Moreover, with regard to companies, Zerfass and Viertmann (2017) show that corporate communication can also contribute to a company's value creation by fostering flexibility, adapting strategy, and ensuring operations, as well as building intangibles, which are crucial factors for the resilience of an organization (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014, p. 314). Hence, it becomes important to take IC into consideration as a part of corporate communication which primarily addresses internal company stakeholders. Through said approach the topic of individual and organizational resilience of corporations can be explored further.

2.2 The Concept of Resilience in Internal Communication Research

According to Zerfass (2010) interdisciplinary and integrated approach, corporate communication pursues the overall goal of "formulating, realization and implementation of concrete corporate strategies" (pp. 289–290). IC, as a part of corporate communication, focuses primarily on the organizational field, whereby the target groups include, on the one hand, the "constitutional constituent groups" who can co-determine the objectives or policies of the company through certain rights or laws, and all other roles such as the employees (Zerfass, 2010, pp. 290–293).

In recent years IC, next to market communication, financial communication, and public relations, has become increasingly important for the success of companies — especially given the constantly changing environment with challenges such as digitalization and globalization they are operating in (Slijepčević, Bovan, & Radojević, 2018). Another reason for the increasing importance of IC is the changing position of the employees in the context of polyphonic corporate communication researched by Christensen and Cornelissen (2011) as well as Zerfass and Viertmann (2016). Within this framework organizations are dependent on the multiplicity of voices of their individual speakers, while simultaneously emerging from it (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2011, pp. 401–402). Organizations, therefore, need to find ways — possibly with the help of IC — of orchestrating these multiple voices of their employees in order to achieve their joint corporate goals (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2016, p. 45). In the context of resilience, Buchholz and Knorre (2012) also point out that IC increasingly sees managers and employees in terms of promoting resilience as an internal resource instead of merely as a target group, by incorporating their knowledge and evaluations into the general management and thus making the company more vigilant for threats (pp. 8–9). All of these statements are indications that, with the changing requirements towards IC, the understanding of employees for IC itself must change. In this context, however, it should be emphasized that the aim within the given paper is not to master isolated change projects (Li, Sun, Tao,

& Lee, 2021) or internal crises (Kim, 2020), but to ensure a corporation‘s long-term success by developing resilience through IC.

When considering barriers to resilience, however, Ford (2018) points out the role of limited access to information, identity constructions that promote simplistic interpretations, a lack of reflection due to message fatigue, and generational differences (pp. 198–199). In the context of the literature review, some aspects from the field of IC that address the stated challenges could already be analyzed. For instance, it was found that at the level of individuals (n = 25), information transfer (n = 5), identification with (organizational) values (n = 3), and feedback (n = 3) or exchange opportunities (n = 3) were particularly frequently mentioned as important factors for building resilience. This is made possible by creating information structures and space for dialogue and by communicating cultural values. In addition, the actions of storytelling, as well as systematic information management, were also pointed out.

At the organizational level (n = 19), it was shown that intra-organizational communication can also initially help to make knowledge and information accessible and usable (n = 4). Leadership communication can also help to positively influence employees‘ sense-making (n = 1) and sending messages of hope (n = 2) can strengthen organizational resilience. IC can, according to the findings of the literature review, finally embed resilience thinking within the whole of an organization (n = 1), strengthen psychological beliefs (n = 1), enhance employee capabilities (n = 1), and promote the dissemination of positive messages about the organization by employees (n = 1). Nevertheless, this is only an initial list which is not to be seen as extensive. A comprehensive, up-to-date empirical study on the topic of IC and resilience in companies does not yet exist.

Buchholz and Knorre (2012), however, have already taken a more general, initial theoretical look at the extent to which IC can make a value-adding contribution to a company‘s resilience. According to them, the goal of the various corporate functions is to ensure that the disruptions and changes caused by the VUCA world have as few negative consequences as possible for the company or its business operations. IC should therefore ensure that anorganization develops an awareness of vigilance, establishes and maintains appropriate routines for this, builds up resilience knowledge, and is always prepared to deal flexibly with disruptions (Buchholz & Knorre, 2012, pp. 14–15). In order to identify possible ways in which IC can influence the resilience of companies, they drew on considerations by Zerfaß (2007): In addition to pursuing value-oriented goals, such as increasing the company‘s revenue or value, which are primarily directed at capital owners, it is equally important to focus on a company‘s other stakeholders to secure legitimacy.

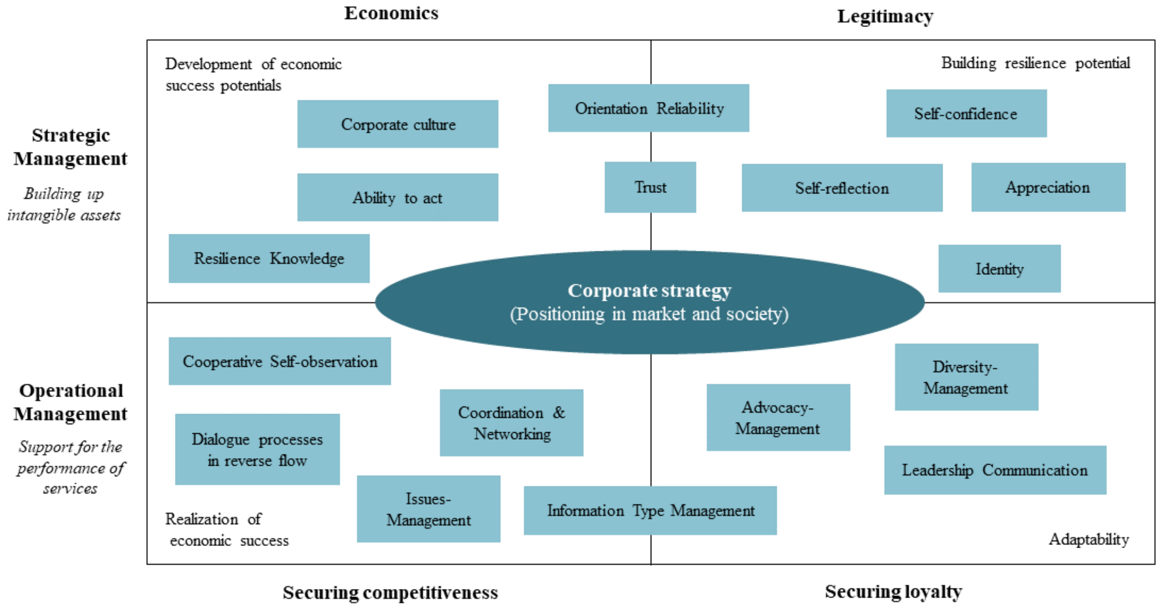

Fig. 1: The Supporting Potential of IC in the Value Creation Process of Resilient Organizations (Buchholz & Knorre, 2012, p. 19, own translation).

Based on the corporate strategy it is thus a question, on the one hand, of achieving economic success by securing competitive advantages, profitability, and liquidity and, on the other hand, of creating and maintaining the “license to operate” (Zerfaß, 2007, pp. 24–27). In the model shown below, by Buchholz and Knorre (2012), it becomes apparent that thus the economic view is also concerned with ensuring competitiveness on one side, and the legitimacy view with employee loyalty, on the other side. However, these two phenomena should not be seen separately from each other; rather, loyalty leads to competitiveness and thus to the achievement of corporate goals within the scope of corporate strategy.

Even so, the existence of many factors effective for competitiveness is also necessary to achieve or maintain loyalty. In this context, the development of intangible values is particularly important (p. 20). Fig. 1 furthermore shows that Buchholz and Knorre could already identify initial potentials of IC that contribute to the creation of competitiveness and loyalty by building intangible capital or supporting the performance of services. Along this line, in a VUCA world, IC constantly has the task of enabling employees to continually adapt to organizational deformations without losing sight of the fundamental direction of the company (Buchholz & Knorre, 2012, pp. 18–19). This study will build further on these initial theoretical considerations by analyzing the latest developments of this topic in the practice of international technology companies.

2.3 Research Questions

Buchholz and Knorre (2012) already present a comprehensive theoretical basis of IC as a management function and its potential contribution to strengthening the resilience of employees and companies. However, the literature review also shows that IC has only sporadically played a role in the fields of resilience-related corporate communication and strategic communication research, which is why further inquiry is needed. Since the technology sector is seen as a leading industry in digitalization and agile ways of working, and is among the industries with the best predictions for digital sales development within the next few years (Grebe, Leyh, Franke, Förderer, & Heinzl, 2018; Workday, 2019), the focus of this study lies on international technology companies. Also, these companies have not been considered in detail in the context of resilience yet, although they suggest being able to provide a lot of information about resilient structures. This paper aims to fill this research gap by exploring the impact of IC as a management function on organizational resilience in international technology companies under VUCA conditions.

Specifically, this study explores the following research questions:

> *RQ 1:* Which actions are taken in the context of internal communication in international technology companies in order to increase organizational resilience through individual resilience?
>
> *RQ 2:* To what extent does internal communication influence agility as a prerequisite for organizational resilience in international technology companies?
>
> *RQ 3:* To what extent does the role of employees change for internal communication in international technology companies in the context of organizational resilience?

3 Methodology

As there were hardly any previous insights or data on the topic, a qualitative approach was pursued to determine which IC activities are taken in practice to promote resilience. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the research questions. As a qualitative work, this paper does not claim to be representative but limits itself to the context of the technology sector. The sample consists of twelve experts in the field of IC from technology companies, operating in multiple markets, with headquarters in a German or English-speaking country, so as not to distort the research results due to language barriers or major cultural differences. The companies employ a total of approximately one million people worldwide and their sizes range from an annual revenue of under five billion (25%) and five to 20 billion (33%) to over 20 billion euro (42%). Further details on the sample can be seen in tab. 1.

Since IC is considered a management function in our study, the selected interviewees were involved in planning, directing, or controlling activities, having a managerial role rather than that of a communications technician (Broom & Smith, 1979). With seven female and five male respondents, the sample is close to the actual gender distribution of approximately 60 percent female PR practitioners in Germany (Bentele, Fechner, & Seidenglanz, 2018, p. 16) and 59 percent women in managerial positions within the U.S. PR industry (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020).

Interviewee Official Position Title	**Gender** male/female	**Company No. of Employees** in Thous. (2020)	**Annual Revenue** in hund. Mill. € (2020)	**Location** Country	**Headquarters** Country
Senior Consultant Employee Engagement	f	293	55.3	GER	GER
Key Account HR (before: Internal Communications)	f	226	101	GER	GER
Director of Communications & Member of the Executive Board	m	168	117.5	GER	USA
Expert Executive & Internal Communications	m	93	45.0	GER	UK
Internal Communications Manager	f	78	40.4	USA	USA
Head of Operations Office and Executive Board & Assistant to COO	m	47	8.6	GER	GER
Head of Communications	m	32	6.3	GER	GER
Global Customer Operations & Internal Communications Manager	f	27	17.2	IRL	USA
Employee Communications Manager International	f	23	10.6	UK	USA
Head of Internal Communications	f	8	0.8	GER	GER
Head of Content in Digital Media	m	8	1.2	GER	GER
Junior Manager Internal Communications	f	2	0.3	GER	GER
	Total	1,005	404		
	Arithmetic Mean	84	37		
	Median	40	17		

Tab. 1: Anonymized composition of the sample (n=12)

The interviews took place from the fifth of January to the twelfth of February 2021 via videoconference and had an average duration of 44 minutes, with the shortest lasting 25 and the longest 50 minutes. Three blocks of interview questions were based on the research questions, which were operationalized in particular by using the model from Buchholz and Knorre (2012). The first block of questions dealt with the creation of individual resilience among employees as well as the connection to organizational resilience and touched on several aspects (promotion of identification with the company, acceptance for change, self-confidence and initiative, employee appreciation, and self-reflection). In the second block, the use of digital tools for

IC in general and the extent to which these contribute to agility was discussed. Reasons for use and the impact on communication were considered, including the implications for cross-hierarchical and cross-departmental exchange and receiver-specific information management. The last block of questions was deliberately designed due to the low level of previous insights, as it addressed upcoming changes in the role of employees, IC, and diversity.

The transcribed audio recordings were transferred into the MAXQDA-software program to apply the method of a qualitative content analysis. Following Fereday and Muir-Cochrane's (2006) hybrid approach, the category system was constructed from both deductive and inductive categories in an "iterative and reflexive process" (p. 83) of obtaining categories from literature and testing them on the material. In this way, both the insights gained from the literature review and the themes derived from the data were considered in the step-by-step construction and adaptation of the codebook. Inter- and intracoder reliability were ensured by group discussion of critical text passages and multiple coding by different coders (Van den Hoonaard, 2008, p. 446). Finally, by paraphrasing and condensing the content and developing core statements, it was possible to structure and elaborate key findings from which a framework was derived.

4 Findings

In the interviews, some IC experts could not clearly differentiate between their contribution to organizational resilience and the resilience of their communication department. Thus, some findings could be attributed to more than one research question. Nevertheless, interviewee responses were collated as precisely as possible and are reported here in the order consistent with the research questions so that three hypotheses can be derived. The results confirm the potentials of IC for promoting resilience identified in the theory in many respects. Nevertheless, the literature analysis can be supplemented by further inductive aspects:

The experts underline how important IC is for promoting resilience potentials for intangible performance creation and thus for corporate success.

4.1 Creating Resilience Potentials

> *RQ1:* Which actions are taken in the context of internal communication in international technology companies in order to increase organizational resilience through individual resilience?

Important aspects for creating agility by IC are facets of orientation, amongst others reliability, motivation, identification, transparency, exchange, sense of purpose, understanding of change and integration. Communicating decisions, events, and developments regularly, comprehensively, and transparently is therefore a main task of IC to provide orientation by offering trustworthy information to employees in a centrally controlled way. Motivation, purpose and identification with the company can be fostered by telling stories from the employees‘ point of view and success stories of the company itself as well as by communicating the added value of corporate activities for society and for customers. Basically, IC serves as an intermediary between employees and various management levels. Whether in relation to middle management or the top board level: Vertical and horizontal exchanges with all employees — on general organizational, job-specific, and higher-level corporate topics — should take place in an understandable, authentic and regularly way. For this reason, the corporate strategy must be prepared for follow-up communication so that employees can fully understand it and align their activities accordingly. As one expert states: “I am motivated when I know what the company is aiming for and what my contribution to achieving that goal is”[2] which shows how important linking individual working objectives to the overall (strategic) journey of the employer is.

One further task of IC is to establish and provide (digital) platforms and exchange formats where employees can address questions and feedback directly to the

[2] The interviews were conducted in German and English. All quotations from German interviews were translated into English by the authors.

management. In a VUCA environment, the communication of changes, (crisis) events or corporate developments such as strategy changes takes on an increasingly important role in generating trust and acceptance among employees. The findings show that an understanding for change is fundamentally created by transparent communication of the status quo, current events and goals of the company. Involving employees directly helps to create this kind of an understanding and increases long-term motivation. In this context, it is especially important to communicate changes first to those employees who will actually be affected by them.

Since organizational resilience is influenced by individual resilience, the mental health of employees is an important factor as well: IC is taking actions to promote well-being, e. g. by establishing art and culture programs in times of the Covid-19 pandemic. The aim of these offerings is to maintain the well-being of employees during an extraordinary time.

Moreover, cultural aspects were dicussed which are considered in all communication activities and messages: In order to maintain the omnipresence of corporate culture and strengthen its visibility, it must be aligned to all communication actions. By incorporating elements of corporate culture such as values, goals, and mission statements into communication messages, employees‘ individual resilience can be strengthened.

4.2 Agility and Digital Ways of Working

RQ 2: To what extent does internal communication influence agility as a prerequisite for organizational resilience in international technology companies?

One basis for agility is target group-specific information management which is realized both through communication according to functional and individual differentiation as well as through self-selection of employees. It turns out that functional differentiation is practiced more frequently to date because it is easier to implement. Furthermore, individual differentiation and self-selection by employees are slowly increasing due to new data based possibilities which offer great potential for providing employees with information that are even more tailored to their needs. This target-group-specific information management can avoid information overload and thus relieve employees. Considering information management improved by the application of controlling methods and datafication, there is a strong focus on the use of digital tools for operational activities in terms of cooperation and collaboration: Eleven out of twelve of the companies surveyed address a multitude of digital (communication) channels and systems which are used. IC is aware of the new working circumstances and opportunities offered by digital means and assumes a dual role concerning their use: On the one hand, IC uses digital tools to perform its own tasks efficiently; on the other hand, it itself acts in the role of a facilitator and enabler to make the use of these new technologies accessible to employees. This trains employees in their independence and promotes collaborative and communicative exchange.

Besides several tools for daily collaboration, live streams and video conferences are used frequently in particular for digital meetings with many employees, such as town hall meetings, board updates, or events where great emphasis is put on dialog with participants. In addition, the intranet as the main communication platform for the entire organization is of high importance, as it can be used to provide both central corporate news and individualized content. Moreover, the use of an employee app is mentioned by two companies.

In order to improve the agility of the company, employees must be encouraged to take responsibility regardless of their position within the company and to act following their own initiatives rather than waiting to receive instructions. To achieve this, the activation of leaders is particularly emphasized as they play a central role in the enablement of their employees. An interviewee describes this as follows: “Developing the desire and ability for self-management is the task of a manager today [...] and leads to a new role, to a new understanding of how work actually happens." One aspect to start with is to actively involve employees in the improvement of processes and activities in relation to their area of work. Experts emphasized that a culture of learning and failure must be integral to ensure continuous improvement. It is helpful to allow constant feedback, so corporate actions and potential weaknesses of the respective business models can be examined. Also, employees can propose ideas on their own and are encouraged to exchange ideas with the IC. In terms of self-reflection, actions and potential weaknesses are critically examined, both concerning the corporate level and the individual level.

Recognition, appreciation, and reward are additional factors fostering employee's enablement: Appreciation can either be shown in a material manner, e. g. through employee participation in the profit generated, gifts or an employee share purchase program, or through immaterial gestures, such as praise, the recognition of performance through awards, trust, or transparent communication. The experts interviewed emphasized especially the importance of non-material appreciation which can be conveyed via personal recognition by managers during everyday working routines. One company also introduced a motivational app that provides employees with a fictional currency, which can then be used to thank specific colleagues for project support.

4.3 Changing Roles

RQ 3: To what extent does the role of employees change for internal communication in international technology companies in the context of organizational resilience?

With increasing individual initiative and enablement, employees must be encouraged and empowered to take on a communicative role as a content creator, content influencer, or advocate to communicate topic-specifically and independently for their area or department in coordination with the IC. One expert described these new tasks and their challenges as follows:

> So whether it is in employee networks [...] or whether it‘s leaders or any other team member. I encourage them to use the platforms to tell their own story and to create their own audience. Their expectation is that I will send everything out for them and they want to send email, but again it‘s an internal comms job to coach people [...] there is a hierarchy of messages, of importance. And we need to make sure that the people understand that channel strategy and how they can fit within it.

With guidance from IC and based on the (digital) platforms it provides across departments and hierarchies, employees are encouraged to generate content by themselves (employee-generated content), e. g. by organizing groups and exchanging information with each other on specific topics. Employees in the role of internal opinion leaders or informal representatives can be perceived as content influencers, i. e. opinion leaders from different peer groups or departments are being involved in the process of developing and distributing messages. This in turn helps IC in gathering impressions on a specific topic in order to communicate to the employees the most suitable and sensitive way. IC strives to build up a network of employees who serve as influencers for the company and pass on the content of corporate communication intended to involve all employees in an organization. In this context, one company takes up the term "employee advocacy" which focuses on empowering employees to advocate activities of their employer externally. Considering the cooperation of these employees with communication professionals on communication-related issues, the following statement reflects the room for improvement which can evolve for daily working routines of IC: "The local representatives of each of those employee resource groups would be engaged and we say `What are your thoughts on this? How can we broaden our thinking on this? How would it work better?`"

As a consequence, the need for resilience management and the change in the role of the employee in terms of communication goes hand in hand with the changing requirements and new tasks for IC professionals: The focus increasingly lies on the provision of exchange platforms and templates for enabling employees and managers to become communicators. The most fundamental change identified is the shift from sending to enabling in daily business: The main task of IC is not just to create content, but to orchestrate it and to enable all employees to create and distribute their own messages and topics. This includes, among other things, the task of managing internal channels, recruiting employees as influencers, providing platforms for communication, and topic management.

Moreover, it is important to find out what is currently on the minds of the workforce, so that these aspects can then be considered within IC:

> But the job of an internal comms person [...] is to get out and build relationships and to listen. [...] Because you won‘t be effective in your job if you don‘t understand what‘s troubling people, what‘s exciting people. How could you possibly design anything that‘s gonna be meaningful for them if you never even met?

5 Discussion

The main purpose of this study is to depict the role of IC as a management function within the linkage between individual and organizational resilience. Furthermore, the interdisciplinary research on resilience should be linked to the field of strategic communication and its discipline IC. Through the systematic literature review, this study first provided academic value by outlining an overview of measures and findings for promoting resilience at the organizational and individual level from the disciplines of psychology, communication, and economics. By synthesizing and contrasting the empirical results with the findings from the literature review, key aspects were compromised in a generic framework of internal corporate resilience management (Fig. 2) that visualizes the cornerstones of building resilience within organizations.

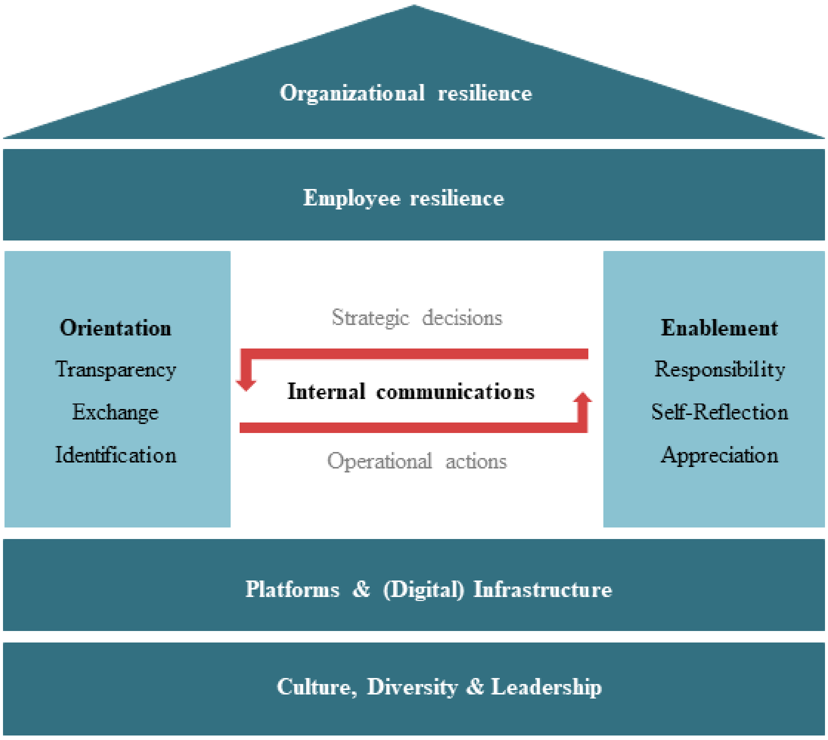

Fig. 2: The contribution of IC to internal corporate resilience management (own illustration)

Overall, IC acts as a bridge between the individual and organizational levels: The understanding of IC shown here demonstrates its managerial and communicative potentials in setting the direction and creating value for the organizations by making employees and, in the long-term, the organization more resilient. Therefore, the framework refers to specific supporting potential of IC (see Fig. 1) and structures them according to a normative approach of internal corporate resilience management. Although the framework is divided into separate dimensions, overlaps and interfaces between levels or columns can be identified. This shows that many aspects have to be considered simultaneously when talking about resilience. From this framework, implications for strategic decisions as well as operational actions can be derived, both for management and communication itself.

Platforms and (Digital) Infrastructure for sharing information and exchanging feedback, as well as *Culture, Diversity and Leadership*, can be named as prerequisites and fundamental influencing factors that determine whether resilience potential can be built up. IC has only limited decision-making power in these areas, but it can address these ways of agile working and can give recommendations at a corporate level (Dühring & Zerfaß, 2021, p. 106) in order to create resilience-promoting conditions. The importance of integrating plurality as part of diversity management and its contribution to creating agility, as already pointed out in the previous literature (Buchholz & Knorre, 2012, pp. 151–152), is highlighted by all experts: IC is meant to cover, promote and convey diversity in all communication activities, to establish gender-appropriate language, and to plan or organize activities and events to draw attention to different manifestations of diversity. Nevertheless, facets of diversity, mostly in the context of gender, are described rather exemplarily in relation to single communication activities. Only a small number of experts mention comprehensive diversity management as a part of their corporate culture. Because of this reason and the general importance of diversity, the aspect is listed separately in the framework.

Furthermore, empirical findings show that providing access to knowledge and information and anchoring resilience knowledge in corporate culture are key topics of resilience-fostering IC (Buchholz & Knorre, 2012, p. 15). Based on these preconditions for resilience, the following hypothesis was formulated:

> *H1:* Corporate culture includes resilience knowledge and agile working with digital tools – competencies that are promoted by internal communication.

Orientation reliability and certainty help employees to see their contribution to the fulfillment of the corporate strategy and of their own tasks — this represents the most important value-added function of IC management, in order to sustain the competitiveness and profitability of an organization (Buchholz & Knorre, 2012, p. 19). Orientation also includes the preparation of the corporate strategy for follow-up communication via information management and exchange formats, so that employees can familiarize themselves with the strategy and orient themselves along the lines of it. Additionally, transparency and identification were identified as important facets of orientation. When talking about creating resilience potential by providing orientation, internal storytelling was mentioned as an important and success-promising communication format. Hence, it should be noted again and is included in the second hypothesis:

> *H2:* Internal storytelling formats increase organizational resilience by conveying facets of orientation.

Employee stories can both increase a sense of purpose and identification and encourage self-reflection. Individual resilience is particularly strengthened when corporate values form the framework for communication activities.

IC departments carry a special responsibility for fostering organizational resilience by enabling other members of the corporation in various contexts: Employee enablement describes the approach of empowering employees to work independently, flexibly, and in an agile way. This can be achieved by offering employees the chance to take responsibility, giving opportunities for individual and collective self-reflection and maintaining appreciation. Additionally, self-reliance and information exchange are drivers of resilience and can be strengthened through the right use of platforms and digital infrastructure. IC must be aware of this and not only use collaboration and communication tools for its own purpose but also to enable employees to use them independently. This promotes agility, which in turn is essential for the resilience of the company. Regarding the topic of communications, IC can make a significant contribution to organizational resilience, if it succeeds in giving employees the power to speak on behalf of themselves and in guiding them to act as content creators or content influencers as proposed in the model of polyphony in corporate communication (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2016, p. 45). The concept of content influencers mentioned in the interviews matches in many ways the understanding of corporate ambassadors given in the literature by Brockhaus, Diecke, Hauck and Volk (2020): Here, employees function as in-house communicators. In contrast to social media influencers as external actors, in-house communicators perform their role on a voluntary and unpaid basis, regardless of their specialist background and job description, and engage in communication activities for, within, about or on behalf of the organization (Brockhaus et al., 2020, pp. 117–118). This study only determined polyphony in relation to IC, specifically on the internal creation and (re-)distribution of content and messages without any regard to their external promotion focusing on corporate brand and reputation. This is why comprehensive concepts like employee advocacy — focusing on the enablement of the external promotion of brands and values of the employer company through supportive actions of employees (Buchholz & Knorre, 2012, pp. 159-160; Thomas, 2020, p. 169) — are not further thematized here. Keeping in mind this changing role of employees (Buchholz & Korre, 2012, pp. 8–9; Zerfass & Viertmann, 2016, p. 45) regarding their tasks as (internal) communicators, the third hypothesis based on the qualitative findings of enablement takes up new communication responsibilities as well:

> *H3:* Internal communication that enables employees and managers to act as communicators increases agility and thus organizational resilience.

It is clear that this new understanding of the role of employees also means a fundamental change in the practice of IC — from sending to enabling.

As a key finding, it can be stated that IC has the potential of creating value in the long term through building resilience potential. This means that the changing role of IC professionals is becoming even more important for the survival of companies in the VUCA world — by creating *individual resilience* and thereby fostering *organizational resilience*.

6 Conclusion

This paper shows that IC can play a significant role in promoting individual and organizational resilience. Statements by Buchholz and Knorre (2012), whose work largely forms the theoretical basis of the given research, could thus be proven and substantiated in practice. In addition, the paper provides insights into the concrete implementation of resilience-promoting potentials in IC practice in the international technology industry. Due to the pioneering role of the companies interviewed, it was also possible to gain initial impressions of best practices. These include, in particular, internal storytelling formats, the enablement of employees to communicate independently, the use of digital communication tools and, above all, the concrete anchoring of resilience knowledge in a corporate culture. The resilience-promoting potential of IC should therefore also be given greater consideration in the training of internal communicators in the future.

As already mentioned, many factors are involved when resilience is addressed, meaning that the levels and dimensions of the framework of internal corporate resilience management are strongly combined in practice and cannot be clearly structured or differentiated. The given framework aims to sketch the most relevant aspects of resilience which were observed in the literature review and also in the interviews conducted with IC experts. This does not mean that resilience itself can be developed in a systematic process following the framework, because of factors correlating and overlapping in practice.

Taking the omnipresence of mental stress in the modern working world into account, further investigation of the phenomenon is not only desirable but absolutely necessary. A quantitative analysis of the effect of communication actions on individual employee resilience would now be a logical next step in order to verify the degree of effectiveness of the activities collected in this study. For this purpose, the hypotheses generated in this paper offer a promising basis. In addition, further surveys at later points in time would be interesting and necessary: On the one hand, this would allow long-term effects and developments in dealing with resilience to be identified; on the other hand, it would also allow the currently latent reference to the Covid-19 pandemic to fade into the background. Many of the changes in corporate communication mentioned in this paper were triggered by the pandemic.

In particular, remote working and the accelerated digitalization determined the IC practice of 2020. This is why the results must be viewed against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic and its multi-layered impact on all areas of life, meaning that the findings cannot be generalized without reservations and caution. The increasing digitization of the working environment would presumably have taken place even without the pandemic, but probably at a slower pace. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify trends that can be used to make predictions about the future of work. In the end, the study of resilience-promoting actions could be extended to other sectors. After all, the challenges that make resilience necessary do not relate exclusively to the technology industry, but all economic branches. This would allow comparisons to be made as well as best practices to be reviewed and identified in other contexts.

The extent to which the VUCA world will influence working life in the upcoming years is difficult to predict. However, organizations and people alike will have to deal with crises and setbacks in the future with absolute certainty. To become or stay successful then, they should have resilience capacities, which might then in turn counteract recent increases in mental illnesses. Companies have a variety of means for this at their disposal, one of them being IC. As the current research has shown, IC has the potential to play a decisive role in shaping individual and organizational resilience and thereby to create value in the long-term.

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KEEPING UP THE DIALOG

Understanding the Use of Social Media by German Mobility Companies During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The theory of crisis communication is usually driven by crises in the environment of corporations or those caused by the corporation itself leading to a loss of reputation and financial fallout. In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic changed the rules of communication strategies during a crisis. Every actor was directly or indirectly affected by the consequences that arose from the emergence of the virus. It forced corporations to establish new ways of maintaining and strengthening relationships with their stakeholders, for example via social media. This paper aims to compare corporate communications before and during the pandemic regarding the Facebook and Twitter channels of three companies of the strongly inflicted mobility sector. For this purpose, 771 posts of Deutsche Bahn, Flixbus and Lufthansa in 2019 and 2020 were analyzed. The qualitative content analysis emphasized that a crisis, which was not self-inflicted, implies more mutual understanding and comprehensibility for the situation of the respective counterpart. Thus crisis management deals less with damage containment but focuses on the treatment of arising issues (cancellations, hygiene measures, uncertainty etc.). This leads to a more personal and emotional communication and profound dialogs with customers. The paper outlines several key aspects for further research and practice concerning the handling of external crises and the general use of social media platforms to strengthen symmetrical communication.

Keywords: social media, crisis communication, covid-19, dialog communication, mobility

1 Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has overlaid all areas of human life. Due to its global scope, daily announcements of partly conflicting information, new regulations and most notably the social uncertainty, the pandemic requires highest attention, being able to seriously affect an organization's performance and reputation (Coombs, 2014, p. 4).

Political measures like travel and contact restrictions as well as behavioral changes pose challenges on most companies, especially those of the transport and mobility sector, for example Deutsche Bahn AG, Deutsche Lufthansa AG, and FlixMobility GmbH. Verma and Gustafsson (2020) assume that due to travel restrictions and changes in people's risk perception for foreign travel, Covid-19 will have a long lasting impact on international tourism and could cause, in the short-term view, a potential loss of $30 billion to $50 billion regarding global tourism (p. 259).

The sharp decline in their business activities in 2020 comes along with growing challenges in customer relationships. As research activities have already shown, the choice of the communication tool in times of crises has significant effects on reputation, emotionality and interactive communication and is partly more important than the delivered message itself (Liu, Austin & Jin, 2011, p. 348 ; Schultz, Utz & Goeritz, 2011, p. 25). Recently Špoljarić (2021) also showed that recipients call for a more personal tone of voice during crises (p. 27).

In this view, social media is playing different important roles regarding the rapid spread of hazard-information, the instruction of the public on risk-decreasing actions (Ophir, 2018, p. 155), as a relationship-builder (Malecki, Keating & Safdar, 2021, p. 702) or as a place of crisis handling (Eriksson, 2018, p. 541; Zerfaß, Moreno, Tench, Verčič & Verhoeven, 2013, p. 71). Already in 2000, Ledingham and Bruning underpinned those aspects apart from digital communication by emphasizing relationship management and open communication as the most relevant measures for dealing with crises effectively (p. 27). Furthermore, stakeholders get the opportunity to express their perceptions of the crisis (Tampere, Tampere & Abel, 2016, p. 61) via social media which indicates again the importance of a dialogic exchange. The participatory character also enables companies to maintain relationships and connect with customers (Adlmaier-Herbst, 2014, p. 8; Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012, p. 293).

Summing it up, social media is an important tool for crisis communication: it allows organizations to share relevant information quickly while engaging in dialog that improves relationships with their stakeholders (Camilleri, 2021, p. 6). Nevertheless, it is underrepresented in the research of crisis communication. Additionally, the Covid-19 pandemic forces corporations to renew their communication strategies. The pandemic as a special type of crisis has not been investigated yet. The existing literature focuses on self-inflicted types of crises in the environment of organizations with most often a clear crises trigger and thus a person in charge (Zerfass et al., 2013, p. 71).

This research presented below examines the theoretical gap of how an external crisis can affect the external corporate communication with customers focusing on the use of social media platforms.

2 Four Key Concepts of Corporate Communication

The Covid-19 pandemic changed the rules of communication strategies during a crisis and has stressed the need for companies to build and manage relationships with their customers. This paper aims at comparing corporate communications before and during the pandemic. To accomplish this, four core concepts of corporate communication were identified as a theoretical base for the present paper: crisis communication, issues management, social media communication, and dialog communication. Their significance and central assumptions are now briefly presented before they are later incorporated back into the discussion part.

2.1 Crisis Communication

When talking about the use of social media during the Covid-19 pandemic., it is important to first gather a common understanding on the topic of crisis communication. As a red-hot issue and special type of a crisis, affecting all areas of the society, it is facing corporations with immense challenges like a constant flow of new information as well as new rules and regulations or even personal concerns. Rapid response, transparency and maintaining continuous contact with the public are eminently important as well as strengthening trust and ensuring legitimacy (Verma & Gustafsson, 2020, p. 257; Zerfass, 2008, p. 68). Therefore, crisis management is an important part of corporate communication and comprises a number of factors that serve to combat crises and reduce the damage caused (Coombs, 2014, p. 4).

The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) (Coombs, 2007, p. 168) identified ten different types of crises that can be classified into three categories. The first crisis category, to which the Covid-19 pandemic can also be assigned, "refers to what [is] known as victim crisis, where organizations are responsible to a limited extent and can be recognized as victims of the crisis along with all other stakeholders" (Romenti, Murtarelli & Valentini, 2014, p. 11). It suggests that crisis managers should match strategic crisis responses to the level of crisis responsibility and reputational threat posed by a crisis.

According to Ledingham and Bruning (2000), relationship management and ensuring open communication helps to deal with crises effectively (p. 27). Maintaining intensive relationships with service recipients is especially important for the service industry such as mobility companies because they influence the success or failure of the company more than other stakeholders do. In this approach, communication serves as a strategic means of moderating relationships with stakeholders. A cultivated relationship thus lowers the perceived risk for stakeholders and provides the company with necessary support in a crisis (Adlmaier-Herbst, 2014, p. 8). Therefore it is important to become a relationship-builder (Malecki et al., 2021, p. 702).

2.2 The Role of Issues Management

Instead of managing crises in such a way that you react in case of emergency, crisis management can also be conceptualized as a continuum of management activity that ranges from potential crisis identification and prevention through event response to post-crisis management in the long-term (Jaques, 2010, p. 469). In this understanding, the "best crisis management is to prevent a crisis occurring in the first place, or that it is much better to anticipate crises than to manage crises" (Jaques, 2010, p. 469-470). Crisis prevention can be divided into three different facets: early warning or scanning, issue and risk management, and emergency response (Jaques, 2010, p. 472; Lauzen, 1997, p. 67).

Issues management, however, was originally designed to enable corporations to participate in and not simply respond to public policy, but can also be understood and conceptualized as an "early warning or pre-crisis mechanism, closely aligned with strategic planning" (Jaques, 2010, p. 473). Wartick & Rude (1986) define issues management as "an early warning system for potential environmental threats, and attempts to promote more systematic and effective responses to particular issues by serving as a coordinating and integrating force within the corporation" (p. 124).

Well and effectively done, issues management is a vital strategy in mitigating the negative effects of crises and even allows organizations to avoid the crisis stage, because ideally, crises can be identified before they are actually occurring (Jaques, 2010, p. 471).

2.3 Social Media as an Effective Tool for Crisis Communication

As various research activities have already shown, the choice of the communication tool in times of crises has significant effects on reputation, emotionality, and interactive communication and is even more important than the delivered message itself (Liu et al., 2011, p. 348; Schultz et al., 2011, p. 25).

There is general consensus among researchers that social media, besides relationship management, is an important and effective tool for crisis communication (Eriksson, 2018, pp. 531-537). On the one hand, it allows organizations to rapidly spread relevant and credible information to inform the public on risk-decreasing actions and spread warnings to the public. On the other hand, it enables them to engage in dialog that improves relationships with their stakeholders, promotes situational awareness, and monitores current developments in the public (Camilleri, 2021, p. 6; Eriksson, 2018, p. 541; Ophir, 2018, p. 155; Wendling, Radisch & Jacobzone, 2013, p. 6).

Similar to the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), "the social-mediated crisis communication (SMCC) model offers guidance for crisis managers built on best practices and knowledge related to social media's role as a channel [...]" (Ihlen & Levenshus, 2017, p. 4).

The participatory character of social media enables mobility companies to engage with this challenge and connect with customers (Adlmaier-Herbst, 2014, p. 8; Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012, p. 293). Furthermore, not only organizations but also stakeholders get the opportunity to express their perceptions of the crisis (Tampere et al., 2016, p. 61). Recently Špoljarić (2021, p. 27) has shown that recipients call for a more personal tone of voice during crises.

While the use of relationship management and social media has been examined in terms of internal crises (a crisis triggered by an organization itself), the examination of social media communications in an external crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic has not yet been investigated. Hence, the aim of this paper is to shed light on corporate social media communication during an external, victim type of crisis as defined above.

2.4 The Value of Dialog Communication

As the fourth pillar of the theoretical basis of this study, the core assumptions of dialog communication are consulted. When organizations are responding to a crisis, no matter if online or offline, they are often especially focussed on maintaining reputation and gaining control instead of seeking a true dialog with their stakeholders.

Crises generate a lot of discussion within social media communication. If an organization wants to interact with affected stakeholders and protect its image, dialog can be contemplated as a viable communication approach. This is not least due to the fact that organizations must actively and proactively participate and not only observe stakeholders' conversations (Romenti et al., 2014, p. 27).

However, as Veil, Buehner, & Palenchar (2011) mentioned, it is important for organizations to balance between engagement, particularly in social media, and the effort to control information, because dialog communication is based on symmetrical, two-way communications and interactive relationships (Romenti et al., 2014, p. 13; see also Kent and Taylor, 1998). The subject of dialog communication is the design of interactions between two actors (Lischka, 2000, p. 18) and only takes place when the recipient can react to the message transmitted to the communicator and also transmits a communication message to the communicator, so a role change is happening (Lischka, 2000, p. 39). Dialog means interacting and exchanging ideas (Ihlen & Levenshus, 2017, p. 4), in the context of corporate communications between an organization and its stakeholders (Romenti et al., 2014, p. 11).

Through dialog, organizations can learn about issues that concern certain stakeholders they would not hear about otherwise. An organization should engage in dialog to cope with public pressure or social changes, in order to avoid exclusive self-focus. Otherwise, it risks reinforcing existing perspectives that might not benefit the organization (or society) or lose the licence to operate in the long run. For this reason, dialog is also a quality of communication (Ihlen & Levenshus, 2017, p. 3).

In principle, various instruments and measures of dialog communication can be distinguished: address function or proactive instruments, information processing function or database management and reception function or reactive instruments. Proactive instruments include all measures of a company that help communicate information to potential or current customers with the aim of establishing contact and initiating a dialog. Reactive tools are all measures that offer the customer the opportunity to get in touch with the company and on the initiative of the organization to respond. This serves as feedback from the customer and as a criterion for monitoring the success of proactive instruments. Online communication is of particular importance for both aspects (Lischka, 2000, p. 44).

In advance of crisis situations, organizations need to engage in dialog (Ihlen & Levenshus, 2017, p. 8). Well before a crisis occurs and regardless of whether a risk is manifested or not, organizations should establish dialog with stakeholders. Especially important is to incorporate social media tools into risk and crisis management policies and plans as well as into everyday communication activities (Ihlen & Levenshus, 2017, pp. 10-11; see also Veil et al., 2011).

Therefore, Romenti et al. (2014) developed, based on previous literature in the field, four conceptual types of dialog strategies[1] feasible on Web 2.0 (pp. 14-15)

All of them have different objectives and their effectiveness depends on the characteristics of the context in which they take place. The framing dialog strategy could be used to participate in online conversations, for example with the intention to reinforce organizational image during crisis, the concertative dialog strategy to offer solutions and present their own position, and the transforming dialog strategy to engage stakeholders in helping the organizations to find the best solutions to respond to the crisis (Romenti et al., 2014, p. 21).

[1] Which were as follows: (1) concertative dialog strategy, (2) transformative dialog strategy, (3) framing dialog strategy and (4) generative dialog strategy.

3 Research Questions

The demand for corporate communication that considers the needs of the stakeholder groups and the demand for a dialog-oriented relationship management increased in the light of globalization, digital interconnectedness and the accelerated exchange. As a result, it also reveals changed expectations for crisis communication. Therefore the pandemic puts companies and their crisis management to the test, especially the economic actors of the mobility sector.

The purpose of this study is to discover how the effects of the virus have changed the communication of German mobility companies with their customers, focusing on the use of corporate social media platforms. Therefore, the following research-leading question was derived: *"To what extent are the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic changing the external social media communication of the German mobility companies Lufthansa, Deutsche Bahn, and Flixbus with their customers on Facebook and Twitter?"* The study tries to close parts of the revealed research gap, following three research questions which specify the leading question:

> *RQ 1:* How does the tone of voice of the posts (by the companies) differ before and during the pandemic?
>
> *RQ 2:* How do the posts differ in terms of their form and content before and during the pandemic?
>
> *RQ 3:* To what extent is a change in dialog communication with customers apparent?

4 Methodology

In order to investigate the presented research questions and to answer the research-leading question, social media posts by Deutsche Lufthansa, Deutsche Bahn and Flixbus were evaluated.

Deutsche Lufthansa AG as the airline with by far the most passengers in Germany (Lufthansa, Condor & TUI, 2020), Deutsche Bahn AG as the largest railway company in Germany (BAG, 2021, p. 28) and FlixMobility GmbH as Europe‘s largest bus company with a market share of 93 % regarding the German long-distance bus market (Losch, 2017) represent the leading mobility providers in their specific business segments in Germany.

The survey was based on a texturing content analysis which allowed to focus on the elaboration of structures out of the data (Poscheschnik, Lederer & Hug, 2020, p. 191) under consideration of quantitative and qualitative elements (Mayring, 2014, p. 6). All published posts by the three companies on Facebook and Twitter from March to April 2019 and 2020 were included (N=771). This period seemed particularly relevant as the virus began to spread in Germany at this time. As a result of this development, people’s mobility was increasingly restricted, borders were closed and restrictions on public life were imposed by the federal government (Federal Government, 2020a; Federal Government, 2020b).

The guideline for coding was composed of deductive categories of the literature which were complemented by inductive categories during the research process. It has furthermore been verified with the help of a pretest. During the analysis, ever more inductive categories, subcategories, and expressions were added.

To investigate the first research question, which deals with the tonality of the posts before and during the pandemic, the dimension of *tone of voice*, including the word characteristics *positive, neutral* and *negative*, was derived (Higgins, 1995, pp. 38-39).

In order to be able to investigate the second research question, asking to what extent the posts differed in their state before and during the pandemic, the dimensions *formal* and *content*, including the *date and time* of the post, its *length of contribution*, *call-to-action elements*, *design elements* as well as its *topic* and *intention*, were derived deductively.

For the third research question, dealing with the change in dialog communication between the company and the users, the first 50 user comments per post were examined. For this purpose, the dimension *dialog communication* containing *general response to the post*, *the basic mood / valence of the comment*, *one-to-one communication* and *number of levels of dialog communication* with several subcategories, was deduced.

5 Results

The results can be divided into two major parts. The first two research questions deal with the tone of voice, formal aspects and the content of the posts, while the third research question deals with the dialog communication below the posts. Thus, the first and second research questions analyze the communication of the companies themselves, while the third research question examines the communication of the companies with the customers.

5.1 Tone of Voice

The first research question, asking to what extent the tone of voice of the positings (by the three companies) differ before and during the pandemic, will be answered.

Overall, it was found that the posts from all companies were predominantly positive in tonality in both 2019 and 2020. Neutral tonality, found in almost one-fifth of the cases, decreased slightly in 2020. Posts with negative tonality could be found very rarely, although the clearest differences between the two years were seen here. While 6.56 % of posts had negative tonality in 2019, the number of posts with negative tonality increased to 10.77 % in 2020.

Comparing the three companies Deutsche Bahn, Flixbus and Lufthansa in terms of tone of voice, uneven results emerged: In the case of Deutsche Bahn, the year-on-year comparison of 2019 and 2020 generally indicated only very slight differences, with a comparatively high share of negative tonality in contrast to the other companies. In the case of Deutsche Bahn, it was interesting to see that the amount of posts with a positive tone of voice was higher in 2020 than in 2019. Evaluating the posts of the company Flixbus, it became clear that the company generally did not use any negative tonality. In 2020, however, a decrease in positive tonality towards a more neutral tonality could be observed. The posts of the company Lufthansa showed a clear difference in neutral and negative tonality in the year-on-year comparison. While here the neutral tonality decreased significantly from 2019 to 2020, the negative tonality increased strongly and showed the most striking difference compared to the other companies.

All in all Deutsche Bahn showed a more positive tone of voice in the crisis year, while Flixbus increasingly used a neutral tone of voice and Lufthansa became significantly more negative in its tone of voice. This can possibly be explained by the fact that compared to Deutsche Bahn, Flixbus and especially Lufthansa also head for non-German regions. As a result, both companies were massively affected by border closures during the lockdown in the crisis year. Buses and planes came to a standstill, which explained a decrease in the positive tone of voice. Especially in the case of Lufthansa, the sharp increase in posts with a negative tonality indicated that the company was affected particularly severely by the crisis.

Thus, the first hypothesis can be derived: *The more a company is affected by an external crisis, the more negative the tone of voice of their social media communication becomes*.

5.2 Formality and Content

In the context of the second research question, which deals with how the posts differ in terms of their form and content before and during the pandemic, the dimensions of *formality* and *content* were derived.

As part of the formality, the length of the posts was examined. It was found that the posts were longer in 2020 than in 2019. Another criteria was the use of call-to-actions. The study showed that they were used in 34.24 % of all posts. The most frequent call-to-actions were *Click on link, Call for information* and *Ask for comment*. Comparing the years, it was noticeable that the use of call-to-actions increased in 2020. Especially *Click on link* (2019: 12.07 %; 2020: 21.54 %) and *Call for information* (2019: 4.20 %; 2020: 15.64 %) were more frequently used in 2020 than in 2019.

The posts included the following design elements: *text, emoji, image (series), infographic, video, link, poll, hashtag, GIF,* and *phone number service*. The most frequently used element was *text*, which still increased slightly in 2020 (2019: 98.42 %; 2020: 99,23 %). A similar trend was seen for *emojis* (40.53 %; 58.46 %) as well as for *links* (31.58 %; 48.21 %). However, the use of *hashtags* and *images* decreased slightly in 2020.

The *content* dimension was distinguished between the *topics* discussed in the posts and the *intention* the companies had in posting the content.

In general, the results of the analysis indicate a wide variety of topics. The most common topics covered in the posts were *corporate information, society/everyday life/culture, goodbye, geography,* and *Covid-19*. In both years, the topic of *corporate information* is in first place, with an increase in importance in 2020 (2019: 46.03 %; 2020: 50.64 %). Looking at the individual companies, both Deutsche Bahn and Lufthansa showed an increase in this topic in 2020, while it has become less important for Flixbus this year.

While in 2019 one-fifth of all posts dealt with the topic of *geography*, in 2020 *Covid-19* was the most frequently addressed topic with 21.85 %. It has newly emerged in 2020 and is characterized by further manifestations like *retrieval action, hygiene measures* and *schedule changes*. Lufthansa communicated most frequently about *Covid-19* (37.5 %), followed by Deutsche Bahn (12.16 %) and Flixbus (9.52 %). Moreover, different characteristics emerged in how the companies talked about this topic. Lufthansa showed a wide variety of topics concerning *Covid-19,* but communicated most frequently about *retrieval actions*. Flixbus communicated only about the topic *retrieval action*, while Deutsche Bahn primarily addressed the topic of *hygiene measures*.

With regard to the *intention*, why the companies published the posts, the categories that emerged most frequently were the intention of *addressing customers* (45.82 %), *providing information* (43.47 %), *inspiration* (20 %) and *entertainment* (10 %). A year-on-year comparison shows a slight increase in posts with the intention of *addressing customers* in 2020. The companies therefore primarily wanted to offer customers an incentive to gain information, while the intention to stimulate a booking declined slightly in 2020. A significant increase was seen in the intention of *informing* from 2019 (34.13 %) to 2020 (52.58 %), whereas the intentions *inspiration* and *entertainment* lost importance. In addition, it was noticeable that there was an increase in posts that included a *thank you note* in 2020, which made the posts more personal.

In terms of the three companies, they differ in the intention of their posts. While Lufthansa's focus was on *inspiration, information* and *addressing customers,* Deutsche Bahn focused primarily on *addressing customers*, followed by *information* and *entertainment*. Flixbus focused primarily on the intentions of *information* and *addressing customers*, whereby they mainly stimulated bookings. In the year-on-year comparison, the intentions *information* and *addressing customers* increased significantly at Lufthansa in 2020, while the intention *inspiration* decreased. In the context of *addressing customers*, the incentives to book and to gain information dominated at Lufthansa. At Flixbus, hardly any differences were found and the intention *information* as well as the *addressing customers* intention and thus the incentive to book tickets continued to be in the lead in 2020. At Deutsche Bahn, there was a clear increase in the intention *information*, while the intention *addressing customers* decreased slightly, often involving a *goodbye-note*.

In summary, the results indicate that there has been an overall increase in communication by the mobility companies. This can be explained by the fact that the companies published more explanatory content at the beginning of the pandemic which can also be seen in the increased use of call-to-actions in 2020. People were primarily encouraged to click on a link and get more information.

The increase of emojis also seemed remarkable, suggesting that companies were pursuing more personalized communication with users in 2020 to increase trust. This assumption can also be supported by more hashtags such as #WeAreInThisTogether by Lufthansa.

The content focus of the posts also shifted slightly in the crisis year. While the topic of corporate information has increased, there was a decline in content dealing with society, culture, everyday life, and geography. In addition, the topic Covid-19 was added in the crisis year, which clearly shows its influence on communication. With regard to the intention of the posts, the companies' intention to communicate information stands out above all. The increase in thank you notes in the crisis year supports the assumption that communication has become more personal.

Based on this, the second hypothesis can be formulated: *In uncertain times, the communication volume of companies increases and communication becomes more personal and emotional*.

5.3 Dialog Communication

The third and last research question deals with the extent to which a change in dialog communication with customers is apparent and gives insights into how the dialogs between companies and social media users have changed. The dimension *dialog communication* breaks down into the four categories: *general reactions to the post, valence of the comments, one-to-one communication,* and the *number of levels of follow-up communication*.

General reactions describe user feedback to a post without a response option from the company. The options of reacting are divided into *likes* and other *emoji reactions*, *commenting* and *sharing posts*. The comparison between 2019 and 2020 shows that in 2019, the average number of likes and other emojis was 11-50. This changed in 2020, when the majority of posts reached up to 400 reactions.

When looking at how often posts were commented on, it can be seen that the number of comments was relatively constant across years. In 2020, 92 % of posts were shared. This equals an increase of 8 % compared to the previous year. In a comparison of companies, this trend was also evident at Lufthansa and Deutsche Bahn. Flixbus, on the other hand, had a higher sharing rate in 2019 than in 2020.

In conclusion, general responses to company posts and shares increased in 2020, while commenting behavior remained relatively the same in both years.

The *valence of comments* is divided into *positive, negative* and *neutral*. Overall, there were mostly positive comments (37.15 %), closely followed by neutral comments (35.33 %). A shift in the users' tone of voice is evident from 2019 to 2020: here positive comments decreased and the part of neutral comments therefore increased. The share of negative comments is the smallest and has remained relatively constant over the years.

One-to-one communication describes the interactions between users and companies and manifests in the comments. Various aspects of dialog communication were examined here, beginning with an assessment of whether the posts generally contain company comments. The overall year-on-year comparison shows that comments on behalf of the company have decreased in 2020. This trend also applies to Lufthansa and Flixbus. Only Deutsche Bahn commented slightly more in 2020 than in 2019.

The *communication strategies*, as another part of one-to-one communication, show which intention users pursued with their comments, to which the companies then actually responded. The results show that a neutral attitude of the users towards the companies was the most represented in the comments in 2020 with 76.16 %. The share of positive attitudes such as *defenses* and *support* decreased by 5 %. Negative responses like *attacks* recorded a significantly stronger decrease of 13 % from 2019 to 2020. This suggests that the general communication between the company and the users was predominantly on a neutral basis.

Another important point of analysis is the content of user comments that triggered the companies to comment. In both 2019 and 2020, *questions* were the most relevant element that triggered corporate commentary. Yet the years differ gradually. 2019 was also characterized by the expression of *criticism* and *reproach* as well as comments on *service*. In 2020, *service* and topics dealing with *refund* or *cancellation* dominated as other relevant forms of user comments. An interesting point arises with regard to the topic of *Covid-19* in 2020, which only accounted for 1.85 % as a trigger for company comments and was therefore relatively low.

Relating the user comments to corporate comments, patterns in how companies have responded to a user comment in certain situations are revealed. The question as the most dominant trigger is mostly answered with *apologies, agreement, further information, forwarding, follow-up,* and *clarification questions* as well as *thank you notes* by the companies. Triggers such as *direct addresses, criticisms* or *reproaches*, and service were equally met with these responses. Comments about Covid-19 in 2020 were also often answered with a *request for patience or understanding*. Topics such as *environmental pollution* or *hygiene* were hardly followed by reactions from the companies.

Another criterion examined the extent to which users‘ follow-up comments were thematically compatible or incompatible with previous content. The results show that more than 85 % of the follow-up comments were thematically coherent. The year-on-year comparison additionally highlights that the thematic coherence of the comments increased up to 96.29 % in 2020.

Another component of the analysis of dialog communication was an analysis of the *levels of dialog* occuring in the comment field. Overall, the dialog partners on the channels served a range of 2-25 levels, with 2, 3 and 4 levels being the most common. The year-on-year comparison showed that more dialog levels aroused in 2020 than in 2019. Although the companies commented less in 2020, the levels of dialogs have increased, showing an intensified communication between the actors during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Summarizing the results of the analysis of dialog communication, some findings are particularly striking. The increase in the number of shares and reactions to posts in 2020 suggests a higher level of activity and engagement among users. While the number of user comments remained relatively similar in both years, there was a shift in the tone of voice of the comments towards neutral comments coupled with a decrease in positive comments. This also reflects the results of the evaluation of the general tone of the posts, even though there was no relevant negative shift in the comments overall.

Regarding the communication strategies, it turned out that companies mainly responded to neutral attitudes and attacks. This is also consistent with the dominant triggers, like questions and service topics, for company comments in both years. In 2020, it can also be seen that companies responded more often to comments on service and refunds or cancellations. The responses from the companies were mostly in the form of providing further information, forwarding, and follow-up or clarification questions. This corresponds to the trend that users mainly ask questions in the comments in order to obtain information. These questions were mostly classified as neutral attitudes towards the company. The topics of service and refund or cancellation, which were also important in 2020, show that the customers of the companies had a greater need for information on direct travel topics.

The increase in the thematic coherence of follow-up user comments indicates that the communication between users and companies has worked and thus the dialog in the comments has been more successful. Also, the dialog between individual users and the company went deeper in 2020. In summary, it can be said that dialog communication in 2020 was more active on the part of users.

These changing trends in dialog communication can be partly explained as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. This led to a general reduction in the volume of travel, and customers were also confronted with cancellations and shortfalls. The emerging problems regarding the booked trips and the general uncertainty can be a reason for the increased need for information. However, it should be noted that although criticism and reproaches were also voiced against the companies, this did not automatically lead to a negative shift in dialog communication in 2020. Critical statements were also represented in the same way in 2019, indicating that the companies were not necessarily exposed to more negative attitudes than under non-pandemic circumstances. This is also supported by the relatively low proportion of Covid-19-related issues in 2020.

Therefore, the third hypothesis can be derived, stating that the changing *dialog communication between customers and companies in an external crisis is characterized by more active dialogs with a neutral, informative character and a greater variety of topics*.

6 Discussion

In summary, the research question

> *To what extent do the effects of the Covid-19-pandemic change the external social media communication of German mobility companies, using the example of the Twitter and Facebook communication of Lufthansa, Deutsche Bahn and Flixbus with their customers?*

can be answered as follows: In terms of tone, overall the companies‘ social media communication in 2020 was slightly more negative than in 2019. In formal terms, the communicative output increased and became more emotional and personal through various design tools and call-to-actions. Thematically, the posts in 2020 were primarily determined by information that directly concerned the companies or the Covid-19 pandemic. Dialog communication with users was more active, information-based, and neutral in the crisis year. In all these findings, however, different characteristics can be identified among the mobility companies studied, which can be explained, on the one hand, by the extent to which the companies are affected. For example, travel with Flixbus and Lufthansa was severely restricted by the lockdown and various travel regulations in 2020. This circumstance could explain why the posts of these companies tend to have a neutral to negative tone. On the other hand, different usage intentions of the companies in the social media communication can also be assumed. Thematically, Lufthansa and Deutsche Bahn are very customer-centric with a focus on providing information, while Flixbus tends to focus on product promotion and sales strategies in its posts.

The trends in information-based communication can be found in all three dimensions, despite company-specific differences. The Covid-19 pandemic has created a great deal of uncertainty among the company's customers, coupled with a wide range of problems. Customers are likely to respond to this uncertainty with an increased need for stability and information. Facebook and Twitter are particularly suitable for meeting these needs. Both platforms enable rapid dissemination of company-specific information on bookings, cancellations, trips, etc., as well as their receipt. Social media is an effective tool in crisis communication in terms of providing credible information and monitoring current developments in the public (Eriksson, 2018, pp. 531-537). This is relevant because crises are always characterized by a lack of certainty. Companies can therefore use the channels to provide both precautionary and active information and to ensure a certain stability. In addition, social media is also suitable as an instrument of crisis communication thanks to the possibility of making direct contact with users, responding to their questions, wishes or criticism and engaging in dialog (Wendling et al., 2013, p. 6). If we relate the existing results to the four dialog strategies according to Romenti et al. (2014), the concertative dialog strategy can be partially observed among the companies' communication. This strategy describes how companies seek dialog with customers in order to offer solutions for the current crisis situation. Such a strategy is congruent with the social media communication of Deutsche Bahn, Lufthansa and Flixbus, which primarily pursued the intention of providing information and therefore solutions, both with their posts and in their dialog with users in the comments section.

Direct contact between customers and companies is essential for the survival of companies in risky and uncertain times such as during the Covid-19 pandemic. In order to remain viable, relationship management, which aims to cultivate and maintain customer relationships, is of particular importance (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, p. 63). Lufthansa, Deutsche Bahn and Flixbus are attempting to do the same in order to survive even after the crisis. This goal can be achieved in part by more active, personal, and information-based customer communication in social media, as the companies pursued in 2020. What was unusual for a crisis in this case, however, was the predominantly neutral communication between companies and users, which was reflected in both the posts and the comments.

The same uncertainty faced by the customers of the companies also preoccupies the companies themselves. As a result of constantly changing rules and regulations on travel, Lufthansa, Flixbus and Deutsche Bahn have also been exposed to many problems, like information gaps in the team. This internal uncertainty could be an indication that the companies commented less overall in 2020 than in 2019 maybe due to limited opportunities to always provide customers with correct and up-to-date information.

Referring back to the research gap of this project report, the external crisis should be mentioned here as a special feature. Unlike grievances that are directly caused by a company and end in a crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic is an external cause that creates a crisis for the companies. It can be argued that customers' understanding towards the companies in the Covid-19 pandemic has increased, which is why communication is neither significantly positive nor negative, but takes the neutral direction. The sense of belonging in the Covid-19 pandemic is also an explanatory pattern for the fact that the companies communicated in a more personal and emotional way. Taking all of these arguments into account, it can be assumed that the change in customer communication in 2020 was less about crisis management and more about risk or issues management (Moreno, Fuentes-Lara & Navarro, 2020, p. 1). This is supported by the above mentioned information communication as an attempt to absorb and compensate for the risks and problems arising from the Covid-19 pandemic with the aim of preventing an internal crisis within the company.

7 Limitations

Reflecting on the whole research project, limitations of the study are now discussed and the strengths and weaknesses of the method used are examined. The pretest was used to ensure that the quality criteria of objectivity and reliability were met. The channels of the companies were divided among the five coders – a stronger mixing could have excluded irregularities during the coding process, which would have guaranteed higher objectivity and reliability.

Since the change in customer communication in comparison 2019/2020 on Facebook and Twitter of the three mobility companies was to be examined and the posts as well as the comments were evaluated on the basis of the listed dimensions, the quality criterion validity was fulfilled.

With regard to the category system, individual categories of the dimensions *tone of voice*, *formality* and *content*, and *dialog communication* are to be critically examined. In the subcategory *length of contribution*, it should first be noted that measurement based on sentences is not meaningful, since each sentence is of different length. Secondly, the sentence length can only be compared to a limited extent in relation to the platforms, since Twitter limits the number of characters to 280 and there is no technical restriction on Facebook. Due to the low informative value of this category, it was not listed in the results section. In the categories *topic* and *intention*, the subcategory *goodbye-note* is strongly represented, which could have led to a slight distortion of the results. The category *tone of voice* or the expression *valence of comments* was evaluated subjectively by the coders. In order to achieve a high degree of objectivity, unambiguous coding rules would have been helpful. It should be noted, however, that these categories are highly context-dependent due to the inclusion of *emojis* and *images*, which influences valence and means that subjectivity can never be completely ruled out.

A technical limitation has arisen due to the coding software (MAXQDA). The collection of 50 comments per post was not always possible because the program did not always transfer all comments.

8 Conclusion

External crises and their impact on communication are rarely examined in existing literature. Therefore, the Covid-19 pandemic offered the opportunity to close this gap and thus expand the state of research concerning corporate crisis communication via social media. The exploratory study thus breaks up the rather saturated research field of crisis communication around a highly relevant factor: the Covid-19 pandemic as an external crisis. In this context, traditional theoretical frameworks such as relationship management or dialog communication gain new importance. The study confirms that interaction and managing relationships are more important than ever, especially in times of uncertainty, fear, and instability. Moreover, it underpins the fact that maintaining direct contact with the relevant stakeholders is essential for companies in crisis situations.

However, the research focused on specific companies (mobility) as well as specific communication tools (social media). This is where further studies need to start and shed more light on these variables, analyzing other companies and channels and corporate websites. The goal should be to be able to describe, explain and, at best, control corporate communications during external crises.

It should also be mentioned that the study took the corporate perspective with regard to the change in communication into account. However, it is equally important to take on the customer‘s perspective, as they have a great influence on content creation, especially in social media. These two perspectives must then be merged to provide realistic and relevant results for corporate communications.

In terms of practice, the results provide important insights, as companies will have to deal with the after-effects of the Covid-19 pandemic for some time to come. Especially when dealing with an external crisis, the results provide important information about what needs to be considered. In the future, for example, companies can take care in situations of an external crisis to respond quickly to customers‘ increasing need for information and thus strengthen and maintain the relationship.

In conclusion, it can be stated that a calm and objective dealing with an external crisis as well as the continuous and active cultivation of relationships with customers should be the ambition of all companies in order to successfully master a crisis.

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A NEW EPISODE OF PODCASTING

The Strategic Implementation of Corporate Podcasts in External Communications as an Innovative On Demand Medium

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Abstract

Podcasts are enjoying a growing number of listeners and increasingly represent an additional channel through which companies can address target groups. Due to its on demand, time-shifting, and mobile characteristics, the medium is predestined for today‘s demanding media users. Despite their growing importance, corporate podcasts as well as their implementation remain an empirically understudied phenomenon. In order to close this research gap, 13 interviews with German podcast managers were conducted. Overall, the results reveal that the medium’s implementation along the lines of strategic communication management still needs to be developed further. Due to the novelty of the usage for organizational purposes, experience is still being gathered. Nevertheless, planning and implementation phases are already well thought through and established. Deficits, however, do exist in the analysis of the situation and in result control. Based on the weaknesses revealed, the study provides hypotheses for further quantitative testing as well as implications for practice, which should be considered to help unfold the potential of the innovative audio format, making podcasts become a tool to strengthen stakeholder relationships more widely.

Keywords: corporate podcasts, podcasts, communication management, strategic communication, corporate communication

1 Introduction

While podcasts were still a niche phenomenon just a few years ago, the audio format has now found a permanent place in the current media landscape and everyday life of many people (Bonini, 2015, pp. 27-28). As listeners are able to choose the time and place of their podcast consumption, consumers gain greater control and possibilities for personalization (Morris & Patterson, 2015, p. 222). Furthermore, podcasts allow for intimate relationships to be built between hosts and listeners (Berry, 2016, p. 13). Due to its increasing popularity in society, interest in podcasts is also growing among companies, which are profiting from the trend in their communication portfolio by producing so-called corporate podcasts themselves (Schreyer, 2019, p. 11). But while expectations towards the medium as a success factor for corporate communications are high in theory, corporate podcasts are still a largely unexplored phenomenon in academia. Research mainly focuses on podcasts in general, examining its evolution (Berry, 2016; Bonini, 2015), its use in various contexts such as education (McNamara & Drew, 2019), health (Turner-McGrievy, Kalyanaraman, & Campbell, 2013), and journalism (Lindgren, 2016) as well as investigating characteristics and motives of its users (Chan-Olmsted & Wang, 2020; Reichow & Schroeter, 2020), and producers (Markman & Sawyer, 2014). An analysis of the literature on corporate podcasts revealed that publications are limited, as they largely consider the medium's strengths and weaknesses (Berr, 2012), fields of application (Deseniss, 2011), formats and strategic premises for its successful use (Hammerschmidt, 2020; Schreyer, 2019). Yet, these statements lack empirical evidence, which highlights the need for more in-depth research. One of the few empirical studies conducted in Germany is provided by Huber, Matthes and Stenneken (2008), who investigated possible effects and success factors of corporate podcasts. Taking theory's constant emphasis on the great relevance of a strategic podcasting concept for the tool's success (Krugmann & Pallus, 2008, p. 23; Schreyer, 2019, p. 11) into consideration, this study is dedicated to analyzing the creation process of corporate podcasts and examines the question:

To what extent do companies in Germany implement corporate podcasts along the four phases of strategic communications management in external corporate communications?

To investigate the topic, this paper builds on a theoretical approach by Krugmann and Pallus (2008). The authors transfer the four phases of the management process (situation analysis, planning, implementation, control) to the podcast production process, the so-called podcasting. After an introduction to the topic of corporate podcasts and a review of the state of research, this management process is outlined. Secondly, the results of 13 semi-structured expert interviews with communication experts responsible for corporate podcasts are presented, followed by answering the research questions and deriving hypotheses. Finally, an outlook on further research and applications in practice is provided.

2 Podcasting: From a Niche Phenomenon to a Trend Medium

The term *podcast* was introduced by the journalist Ben Hammersley in 2004 and originated from a blend of the apple MP3 player's name *iPod* and the noun *broadcast*. It "generally refers to an episode or series of audio content downloaded or streamed from the internet on demand or via subscription service" (Brown, 2020, p. 1). Furthermore, podcasts are based on three key technologies: just like MP3 files, they are audio formats published on the internet, which can be subscribed to as they include a Really Simple Syndication feed. Moreover, podcasts consist of several episodes (Brown, 2020, p. 1).

While the market developed rapidly in the U.S., mainly due to Apple's iTunes music platform, the medium spread only gradually in Germany (Ruisinger, 2011, pp. 203-204). It was not until 2005/2006 that podcasts triggered a boom in this country. At first, they were mainly published by radio and TV stations or hobby podcasters and were characterized by amateurish use (Schreyer, 2019, p. 2). Since 2014, however, podcasts have transnationally entered what Bonini (2015) calls the "second age of podcasting" (p. 22): a phase that is characterized by professionalization and commercialization of the new media format. Reasons that led to this resurgence were a steady proliferation of smartphones and mobile Internet usage as well as a change in general media consumption towards a more self determined and flexible use (Hammerschmidt, 2020, p. 13).

In line with the professionalization of podcasts, companies also started to increasingly use the format for their own corporate communications (Deseniss, 2011, pp. 129-130). These podcasts, published by companies or brands, are called corporate podcasts. Their goal is to enhance a company's positive image, which can be achieved through a strategic orientation and the conceptual embedding of the medium in the company's communication and marketing strategy (Schreyer, 2019, pp. 4, 11). In this context, a corporate podcast represents a direct channel to all relevant internal and external stakeholders and can be used in marketing and corporate communications in different ways (Ruisinger, 2011, p. 205). Specifically, corporate podcasts can function as instruments of direct product information, as product-supplementing services in the context of sales promotion, as customer loyalty tools, or as instruments for building up experience brands (Deseniss, 2011, pp. 132-136).

They are characterized by an authentic DIY-character, even in today's professionalization of podcasting (Schlütz & Hedder, 2021, p. 3). In addition, the audio format offers the chance of unadulterated and authentic communication, because communication takes place directly and is not subject to an editorial filter and gatekeeper (Krugmann & Pallus, 2008, p. 14). Due to its informal, conversational style and the focus on serial storytelling, a podcast can build a loyal audience. Moreover, the focus on stories leads to a high narrative absorption and a high listener involvement (Schlütz & Hedder, 2021, p. 3). An additional strength is the personal and emotional appeal to the recipients, which is made possible by the audio form. The focus on sounds and voices paired with the time and space independent consumption can create closeness and a deep intimacy with the listeners (Berry, 2016, p. 13), bring about a lasting bond between brand and listener, and have a positive impact on brand perception (Schütz, 2014, pp. 9-10). That is why they are ideally suited for persuasive communication in a company's external communication.

3 The Standpoint of Corporate Podcasts in Literature

Empirical research on podcasts began in 2004, shortly after the emergence of the first digital audio files (Bonini, 2015, p. 24). Research thereby mainly focuses on the medium's usage in contexts such as education, health, and journalism. The educational podcast literature for example is concerned with the potentials and uses of podcasts in the education sector (Kay, 2012; O'Bannon, Lubke, Beard, & Britt, 2011) investigating among other things the impact of podcasts on learning (McNamara & Drew, 2019). In addition, some studies have researched demographic characteristics and motivations of podcasters (Markman & Sawyer, 2014), while others studied the media format itself, discussing its evolution (Berry, 2016; Bonini, 2015) and the impact of digital audio platforms such as Apple and Spotify on the podcast industry structure, content and governance (Sullivan, 2019). Moreover, the influence of podcasting on the broadcasting market and especially its relationship with radio has been scrutinized. In 2016, Berry raised the questions whether podcasting can be regarded as a form of radio or radiogenic practice and whether it is displacing traditional radio listening. Despite similar formats, content, and duration, he concludes that podcasts have developed certain characteristics that distinguish them from radio. While he already refers to radio as an intimate medium, he argues that podcasts go one step further and convey a "hyper-intimacy" (p. 666) through an intimate listening environment and form of communication. Bonini (2015) also states that podcasts not only exist complementary to radio but are an alternative to it (p. 23).

In the context of journalism research, the effects of podcasts on non-fictional audio storytelling formats were also investigated. Thereby, the format of personal narrative journalism in podcasting could be identified as a new, informal genre (Lindgren, 2016, p. 23), which forces a strong relationship between presenter and listener (McHugh, 2016, p. 66). Taking those findings into account, Schlütz and Hedder (2021) analyzed listeners' parasocial relationships to podcast hosts, the causes thereof and its persuasive effects. The study showed that podcasts do not differ strongly from other mediums when it comes to building parasocial relationships, but, nevertheless, a hosts' opinion and the topics they are talking about might put certain topics on the agenda of the listeners and can be thought provoking and action leading (pp. 9-11). These results give reason to believe that companies that manage to build a good relationship with their listeners through their podcast can also inspire follow-up actions.

In addition to studies that refer to specific areas within the use of podcasts, there is also a steadily growing number of studies that regularly survey the socio-demographic characteristics of podcast listeners and their behavior (Reichow & Schroeter, 2020) as well as reveal their respective motives for consumption (McClung & Johnson, 2010). Recent studies show that typical podcast listeners are young, well-educated, and hold purchasing power (Podstars, 2021, pp. 4-7). When it comes to their consumption motives, Chan-Olmsted and Wang (2020) provide the newest empirical research, aiming to draw a comprehensive picture of the motivation and usage of podcast users in the United States. They found out that the three most popular motives for podcast consumption are entertainment, information and audio platform superiority, which the researchers define as "the desire to use an audio platform that is perceived to be superior to other audio alternatives" (p. 9). According to the study, respondents for whom the entertainment motive is particularly important use podcasts to relax and be entertained. The information motive relates back to the respondents' desire to learn new things about the world around them through the podcast (Chan-Olmsted & Wang, 2020, p. 9). These findings should be considered by companies when choosing the format and content of their corporate podcast. Overall, however, it can be stated that the studies as well as the metrics and indicators are not yet as pronounced and meaningful compared to other media genres (Hammerschmidt, 2020, p. 26). Currently, there is still a lack of uniform benchmark instances with regard to podcasts (Reichow & Schroeter, 2020, p. 513).

Among the different fields of study concerning podcasts, corporate podcast research is especially fragmented and scarce. The literature is limited to publications on the medium's strengths and weaknesses, fields of application, formats, and strategic premises for its successful use (Schreyer, 2019). Empirically, however, little consideration is given to corporate podcasts and their implementation which stresses the importance and need of further research. Huber et al. made a first attempt to counter the research deficit in 2008. In their study, they investigated possible effects and impact processes of corporate podcasts and identified success factors for their use. When interpreting those results today, however, it is important to keep in mind that the study dates back to the first podcast era, meaning that the findings therefore might not be accurate anymore today. Nevertheless, they can serve as a first base from which to start researching further. Within Huber et al.'s (2008) study, the listeners' attitude towards corporate podcasts is seen as a central construct in the impact process. Thus the authors researched to what extent said process is again determined by the information content, entertainment value, perceived value of the corporate podcasts as well as the mood of the podcast listeners and the general attitude towards online advertising. The results showed that the constructs of information value, entertainment value and the perceived value of the corporate podcast have a significant influence on attitudes towards the corporate podcast and thus can represent success factors. Listeners' attitudes towards online advertising and their mood, however, have no influence on stances towards corporate podcasts (Huber et al., 2008, pp. 147-149).

In addition to the impact of corporate podcasts, other focal points in the previous literature are producer's viewpoints on the format and initial theoretical considerations about the creation process within companies. Krugmann and Pallus (2008) emphasize the importance of strategic planning by highlighting that podcasting requires a management process in order to be able to fully exploit acoustic impact potentials (p. 23). The authors classify the communication instrument as a part of acoustic brand positioning and transfer the four phases of communication management to the creation process of corporate podcasts. In doing so, they assign the individual steps of podcasting to situation analysis, planning, implementation, and control, analogously to the phases of communication management. The authors' theoretical considerations serve as the basis for this study.

4 Theoretical Background: Podcasting as a Management Process

The theoretical assumptions of podcasting as a management process by Krugmann and Pallus (2008) will now be examined for its application in practice. Figure 1 shows the individual steps of the respective phases. However, in this study, the design of each phase of strategic communication management is supplemented by considerations from current publications on the subject of corporate podcasts (see Hammerschmidt, 2020; Schreyer, 2019).

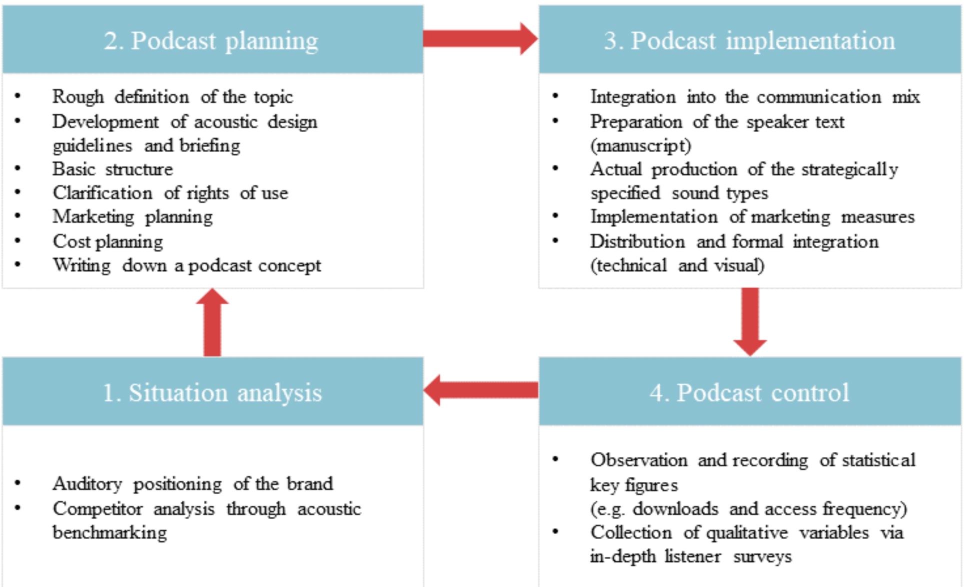

Figure 1. Podcasting as a Management Process *Source*. Own illustration based on Krugmann & Pallus, 2008, p. 20

According to Krugmann and Pallus (2008), the auditory positions of the brand or company, as well as podcasts from competing brands and companies, are analyzed within the situation analysis (p. 68). In the course of podcast planning, the overall topic of the podcast is roughly defined, acoustic design guidelines are developed, the structure is determined, the rights of use of the music used are clarified, marketing planning and cost planning are carried out, and a podcast concept is established (pp. 21, 74, 77, 87, 89, 96-97). Moreover, the goals of podcasting are determined (Schreyer, 2019, pp. 16-18) and target groups are defined (Hammerschmidt, 2020, p. 68). Following the argumentation of Krugmann and Pallus (2008), all planned measures to publicize the podcast are realized within the implementation phase (p. 21). Furthermore, another part of the implementation phase is the production of the planned sound types, the preparation of speaker texts (pp. 20-21) as well as the determination of the distribution platforms (p. 130) and the frequency of publication (Hammerschmidt, 2020, pp. 76-77). Finally, quantitative indicators, such as the number of downloads per episode, are recorded in the last phase of podcast monitoring, and qualitative data is collected through surveys distributed to listeners (Krugmann & Pallus, 2008, p. 21). In addition, a process control is carried out to reflect on selective decisions in the individual phases, to adjust the actions aligned to the achievement of objectives and to check the validity of the formulated objectives (Zerfass, 2014, p. 69).

Based on the four phases of the podcasting management process according to Krugmann and Pallus (2008), four research questions (RQs) were posed in the given research to verify in how far the phases are actually implemented by companies hosting a corporate podcast.

> *RQ1:* To what extent is a situation analysis conducted to position the corporate podcast?

> *RQ2:* To what extent is the concept of corporate podcasting based on strategic planning?

RQ3: What criteria are taken into account in the implementation of the corporate podcast?

RQ4: To what extent does a result and process control of the corporate podcast take place?

5 Method: Qualitative Expert Interviews with Communication Executives Responsible for Corporate Podcasts

Due to the exploratory character of the study forming the basis for this research and in order to fill the research gap described above, qualitative expert interviews were conducted. The sample comprises 13 communication executives responsible for a corporate podcast in external corporate communications. To ensure comparability between the strategic communication management of the respective corporate podcasts, the selection criterion of the companies with the highest revenue in Germany was set. In addition, media organizations were deliberately excluded from the sample because the focus was placed on companies whose core business does not lie in the provision of communicative means. To draw the sample, German companies from the "Fortune Global 500 2020" list (Fortune Media IP Limited, 2020) and the "GLOBAL 2000 - The World's Largest Public Companies" ranking, also from 2020 (Murphy, Tucker, Coyne, & Touryalai, 2020), were taken into consideration. In the period from December 8th, 2020 to December 15th, 2020 a total of 22 experts with the above-mentioned characteristics had been contacted through various channels, and interviews were conducted with 13 of them (equalling a 59 percent success rate). The surveyed companies and their corporate podcasts are listed in table 1.

Company	Interviewed Communication Expert	Podcast Name	Launch
BASF SE	Digitalization in Communications and Manager Corporate Social Media	ELEMENTary	2020
BMW AG	Digital Audio & Voice Strategy	HYPNOPOLIS	2020
Daimler AG	Editor-in-Chief Daimler Podcast	HeadLights – Der Daimler-Podcast	2019
Deutsche Bahn AG	Head of Media Cooperation and Content	Unterwegs mit...	2020
Deutsche Bank AG	Media Spokesperson	PERSPEKTIVEN To Go	2018
Deutsche Boerse AG	Senior Executive in Group Communications & Marketing	Boersenplatz – Der Podcast rund um die Finanzwelt	2020
Deutsche Post DHL Group	Senior Managing Editor internal Online Platforms, Formats and Storytelling	Living Logistics	2020
Deutsche Telekom AG	Press Officer	Telekom Netz	2019
Henkel AG & Co. KGaA	Corporate Communications Employees in the Corporate Branding & Communications Strategy Team	Fritz for Future	2020
Merck KGaA	Senior Manager Brand Communication	Future Talk	2018
Porsche AG	Head of Corporate Publishing	09:11. Porsche. Podcast.	2020
SAP Deutschland SE & Co. KG	Customer Advisory Lead	SAP Experts Podcast	2019
Siemens AG	Communications Manager	Talking Digital Industries	2019

Table 1. Characteristics of the sample

The interview guide developed included 14 open-ended questions, which could be formulated differently or adjusted in the respective interview situations. Therefore, it is possible to speak of a partially standardized survey (Scholl, 2018, p. 77). For the conception of the interview guide, the most important steps in the respective phases of podcasting as a management process according to Krugmann and Pallus (2008) were retrieved and formulated as interview questions (pp. 20-22, 67-138). In addition, relevant aspects from communication management according to Zerfass (2014) as well as the basic works on podcasting by Schreyer (2019) and Hammerschmidt (2020) were consulted in order to enrich the four phases and consider them extensively. Moreover, further interview questions were generated based on identified research gaps.

The test questions were partially supplemented by contingency questions to ensure that the most important points needing to be found out were mentioned (Scholl, 2018, p. 70). In addition, some test questions included examples or specification questions for illustration purposes. The examples and specification questions were optional and only mentioned if the interviewee did not know what the question asked was intended to address. The contingency questions, on the other hand, were asked if an interviewee did not address a significant aspect of the main question. To check whether the questionnaire is comprehensible, a pretest was conducted with the person responsible for the corporate podcast "Der Apothekenpodcast".

The interviews were conducted via video conference softwares. No test questions were sent to respondents in advance to avoid strategic planning of question responses by study participants (Scholl, 2018, p. 207).

The interviews were evaluated using a qualitative content analysis according to Mayring (2014). The development of a category system, containing both deductive categories derived from theory as well as inductive categories extracted from the text material, ensured a structured, rule-based, and comprehensible evaluation (Mayring, 2014, p. 97). For each research question, one specific deductive main category with corresponding deductive subcategories was modeled. The main categories represent the four phases of podcasting as a management process according to Krugmann and Pallus (2008, p. 20). Moreover, the categories and subcategories were inductively further developed, differentiated or complemented in the course of the first coding and afterwards were revised again so that the existing material could be exhaustively mapped with the final category system in the following coding run. Before the actual coding of the interviews, the research group carried out a reliability test. For this purpose, all research group members test-coded the same interview and discussed the coding afterwards. This ensured the quality criterion of intercoder reliability (Mayring, 2014, p. 42). It was also made sure that the members of the research group did not code the interviews that they conducted themselves.

6 Results

When presenting the results, the names of the specific companies are given as representatives for the corporate podcast. However, as some individual companies operate several podcasts, results cannot be equated with the attitudes and approaches of the entire companies and instead should only be seen as representative for the respective podcasts in the sample.

6.1 Situation Analysis

The first research question considered here is dedicated to the conduct of a *situation analysis* for the positioning of the corporate podcast. With regard to the *competitor analysis* as part of the situation analysis, it can be stated overall that only a very small proportion of companies from the sample would classify their own approach as strategic. Nevertheless, a majority of the companies specified that they had checked on relevant podcast platforms to see to what extent companies in the same industry, or on the German market in general, already publish a corporate podcast. In addition, some of the podcasters indicated that a competitor analysis was hardly implementable when they were planning their podcast, due to the small number of corporate podcasts on the German market. Other corporations, however, stated that they had taken a more in-depth look at the German corporate podcast market. The motives for a more detailed investigation of the podcast market can again be distinguished in two ways. BASF SE noted that this step served as a basic orientation for the planning of their corporate podcast. At the same time, the competitor analysis also helped the companies to differentiate themselves from the existing competition in a targeted manner. In general, it can be seen that many of the interviewed companies indicated that they had carried out an analysis of the general podcast landscape rather than a competitor analysis.

When looking at the *auditive analysis*, some of the respondents stated that they use the corporate jingle in their respective podcasts without having consciously thought about the intention of this use. At the same time, many of the companies noted not having a corporate jingle, an overarching sound strategy, no corporate sound, or a sound identity that could have been used for a corporate podcast. In contrast, the use of melodies was thought through in detail by many of the respondents. Here, the focus was often laid on the fact that the melodies used should fit the topic and format of the podcast and do not necessarily need to have a direct connection to the company.

6.2 Planning Phase

When determining the overarching theme of the corporate podcast in the *planning* phase, some of the companies surveyed stated that they had derived their theme from the overarching communications strategy and thus from the *corporate strategy*. Other companies in turn derived the *overarching theme* of their podcast from other communication measures, such as their customer magazine. With regard to the corporate reference of the corporate podcast, a distinction could be made on the basis of the sample between a *direct* and an *indirect corporate reference*. About half of the respondents chose a topic for their corporate podcast that has a direct connection to their company. For them, it was primarily important to highlight their own expertise through the podcast and to position themselves as credible experts in their respective subject area. Those companies whose corporate podcast only indirectly references their company largely pursued the intention of focusing on a topic of direct interest to the listeners.

In terms of the podcast *format,* most of the companies surveyed chose a *talk* or *interview format* for their podcast. This was mostly justified by the possibility of being able to explain a topic in greater depth by referring back to experts. Also, the efficiency advantage was given as a reason for choosing this format. Only two of the interviewed companies opted for different podcast formats, but with the same intention in both cases. The BMW AG developed a *fiction podcast* in order to “practically stand out from the competition"[1] (BMW). The Deutsche Post DHL Group decided in favour of a *reportage podcast*. Nevertheless, it was noted in this regard that the production of the reportage podcast as a "lead format or concept [...] for corporate communication is rather difficult to realize" (Deutsche Post DHL Group).

Differences in the companies' approaches can also be seen in their choices of *speakers*. The choice of an *internal moderator* was made either for reasons of efficiency or to ensure a direct link to the company. When deciding on an *external moderator*, many companies pursued the intention of introducing a questioning external perspective into the podcast or to have the podcast be moderated by a person who is already known to the audience. The *number of speakers* varies across the sample between one and two. Interestingly the companies with two moderators mention the creation of a casual discussion atmosphere and the representation of different views on a topic as the reason.

In this context, it is also interesting to take a look at the *objectives* pursued within corporate podcasts. The majority of companies pursue, among other things, the goal of *positioning* their company through the podcast. Here, the respondents are primarily concerned with providing a deeper insight into the company. Through the podcast, the company's values and commitment or employee engagement should be reflected and made visible. Furthermore, it is equally important to the companies surveyed to create a certain *added value* with their corporate podcast. The corporations are not interested in promoting products or brands, but instead want to share expert knowledge, provide an insight into the industry, present more complex issues and thus make the company's world of topics accessible to the interested public.

> [T]hat's why I call it an expert podcast, because I'm not pitching a product here or anything. The best case szenario for corporate podcasting would be: If somebody says to me, 'Yeah, I've got a new product and I want to pitch that,' I'm like, 'Do that somewhere else, this is not the right place to do that.' [...] Because no one listens to a podcast because of a product pitch (SAP).

[1] All quotations from German interviews were translated into English by the authors

Some of the companies also hope for a positive effect on their *image* in order to gain the trust of the target group through expertise, to strengthen the brand or to be perceived as an attractive employer. Furthermore, for some of the respondents it was particularly important to create a novelty experience for the listeners with the help of the podcast and to gain a new communicative touchpoint with the target group.

The responses to the measures taken to *promote* the podcast indicate that many of the podcasters use *paid advertising* and *paid content* on all social media channels to draw attention to their podcast. The *corporate social media channels* of the companies are also mostly used to promote the podcast. At the same time, however, several of the respondents noted that the company's own social media channels are judged to be an unsuitable advertising medium because they are not authentic and hardly any positive impact could be determined. Thus, Deutsche Boerse noted: "You need ambassadors!" (Deutsche Boerse). Many podcasters therefore rely on the promotion of their podcast via *private social media channels*, such as the channels of the moderators or podcast guests, as these are more personalized, have their own audience and can therefore be classified as more effective.

6.3 Implementation Phase

As part of the implementation phase, it was firstly analysed which criteria were used to determine the *topics of the individual podcast episodes*. The most frequently mentioned criterion for a topic was its fit with the *topics of the company*, though why said fit is important was often not reflected. If a reason was given, it was, for example, that the podcast should represent the company or that cross-promoting effects should be brought about across departments. Other frequently mentioned reasons for selecting a topic were the *currentness* and *social relevance*. In contrast to this, several companies stated that in their choice of topics for the individual episodes they focus on topics that do not need to be published timely. Instead, *timeless topics* were chosen especially when a series of podcast episodes were to be pre-produced in order to ensure regular publication. Another aspect of planning the individual episodes of the podcast is the *time planning*, which is often handled very differently: While some companies only have a short planning horizon in order to be able to react flexibly to current topics, others rely on long-term planning of their episodes so that a regular publication rhythm can be maintained.

Examining the *relevance of a podcast* in comparison with other communication measures, it becomes clear that for the majority of respondents, corporate podcasts have established themselves as an equal instrument in the communication mix and are used supplementary to other channels. However, it was emphasized that corporate podcasts cannot replace other communication channels, as each channel can reach different relevant target groups. With regard to the relevance of corporate podcasts, the *advantages* of the *depth of the topic* and the *high involvement* of the recipients were pointed out, especially in comparison to social media. Generally, a tendency could be observed that an increasing relevance of podcasts is assumed, but the exact development is still difficult to assess.

Another aspect of the strategic implementation podcasts is the *distribution*, where various strategic commonalities can be observed in all companies. All respondents distribute their podcasts via several well-known audio *platforms* and some additionally via internal or personal channels such as the corporate website or the intranet. All respondents distribute their podcasts via platforms that are often referred to in the survey as “classic podcast channels”, namely Spotify, Deezer and Apple Music. It was often mentioned that the respondents publish their podcast via hosts such as Podigee, which then in turn publish the podcast on various platforms. With regard to the chosen *time cycle* of the publications, it becomes clear that all companies chose a publication cycle varying from at least once a month to at most once a week. Of particular relevance here is that a regularity of the publication must be ensured in order to not lose any long-term listeners: “We took a bit of a break [...], which showed itself in our audience figures. [...] [S]o you need to maintain the regularity as much as possible” (Siemens).

6.4 Control Phase

In order to evaluate the strategic *control* of results conducted by the corporate podcasters, the first step was to ask to what extent clear *Key Performance Indicators* (KPIs) were defined in advance of the podcast production or publication. A striking realization was that by far the largest proportion of the podcasters surveyed did not define any KPIs they were striving to achieve in advance. Instead, the focus often rested on trying out and learning how a corporate podcast can develop in the first place.

Overall, the respondents mainly use *quantitative key figures* to monitor success. The *number of streams* or *listeners*, *downloads per episode*, and *subscribers* were listed as particularly relevant. In addition, the *listening-through rate* was emphasised as a decisive metric. Many of the companies attribute greater importance to this than to, for example, the number of accesses and the reach of the podcast. BMW, for example, stated in this context that the

> listen-through rate is worth more to us than the reach itself. One listener who is enthusiastic about the topic and engages with our brand for 120 minutes is worth more than 1,000 who only tune in for one minute (BMW).

To date, however, there has hardly been any monitoring of results by means of *qualitative methods*. Only a few companies proactively collect direct *feedback from listeners*, for example via surveys. Rather, *colleagues* are informally asked for their opinion on an episode or *social media reactions*, such as comments, are analysed. Many respondents also addressed the *challenges* of monitoring results in this context. The two most frequently mentioned difficulties were *access to data* and the lack of *comparability* resulting from said lack.

From a strategic point of view, the companies surveyed draw different *lessons* from the monitoring of their respective results. Often, the monitoring of results is used to draw conclusions for future podcasting productions. In addition to monitoring results, the survey also considered *process monitoring*, which usually concerns questions such as: “What went well, what went badly, what can we perhaps optimise? How can we develop the format further?” (Deutsche Bank). The *frequency of process control* varied within the sample from frequent and detailed to once or twice a year. Contrary findings included that there are no fixed *times for the process control* conducted by the interviewees, but rather it is carried out as needed. Within the framework of the process control, it is reviewed, for example, what one is currently satisfied with in the podcasting process and where there is still room for improvement. In addition, it is checked how well the cooperation (internally as well as with external partners) works and has worked in the past. The *insights gained from the process control* were far-reaching and varied. Several companies cited the importance of good sound quality as a finding. Others also stated that in the future they would like to rely on guides rather than scripts when preparing for interviews, so that the podcast comes across as naturally as possible. At the same time, it was once again established that a regularity in publication must be maintained in order not to lose listeners.

7 Discussion and Implications

The results of the study revealed the overarching tendency that the planning (RQ2) and implementation (RQ3) phases of strategic communication management tend to be more well established and are often implemented according to the recommendations from literature. Deficits, on the other hand, exist in the situation analysis (RQ1) and the control phase (RQ4).

The situation analysis corresponded with the theoretical considerations by Krugmann and Pallus (2008) in such a way that the results of the survey show that it was mostly considered whether and to what extent companies in the same industry use corporate podcasts and which best practices dominate the podcast market. However, hardly any companies conducted a strategic benchmark based on the criteria recommended by the authors (Krugmann & Pallus, 2008, pp. 70-71). Despite this, the differences found within the sample with regard to the extent of the conducted competitor analysis could be explained by varying first implementation periods: Those companies that first started publishing their podcasts in the period from 2018 to the beginning of 2019 did not have the opportunity to conduct a comprehensive competitor analysis, as only a minimal number of corporate podcasts existed on the German market at that time. Companies that have been publishing their corporate podcast since 2020 have a much more comprehensive approach in this regard. In doing so, they pursue the conscious goal of differentiating themselves from the existing competition through new formats and of utilizing the knowledge of best practices for their own podcast.

With regard to the auditory analysis in the context of the situation analysis, the results show that many of the companies surveyed do not possess the auditory elements recommended for acoustic brand management, such as sound logos and brand songs. Although a consistent acoustic brand presentation to the target group is assessed as an important recognition feature (Krugmann & Pallus, 2008, pp. 25-30), being able to create a sustainable connection between host and listener (Schütz, 2014), this approach is not reflected in the information provided by the sample.

In view of RQ1, asking to what extent a situation analysis for the positioning of the corporate podcast was conducted, it can be stated that this first phase of communication management was only carried out extensively and strategically by very few of the interviewed companies. One possible reason for this finding could be the trial-and-error character of corporate podcasts, which many of the companies attribute to this still rather new communication instrument. These considerations are also reflected in the further research questions. The discrepancy with the literature, which emphasizes the integration of the corporate podcast into acoustic brand management, gives rise to a need for further research. One hypothesis to be tested is:

> H1. *Corporate podcasts that are strategically embedded in a company's acoustic brand management contribute more to brand loyalty.*

In the first step of podcast planning, the overarching theme of the podcast should be roughly defined, since this already results in a primary selection of potential listeners (Krugmann & Pallus, 2008, p. 74). At this point, a strategic approach can be observed across the entire sample, since both the fit to the own brand and the interest of the target group were considered by the companies in their choice of the overarching topic.

With regard to the objectives of the podcasts, it can primarily be seen that they were rarely derived from the corporate strategy and noted in a defined manner. Accordingly, the influence of the corporate podcast on the corporate strategy seems to hold less meaning in practice than it is assumed in theory. Nevertheless, many of the theoretically stated goals can be found in the information provided by the sample. The goals mentioned most frequently were corporate positioning (e. g. by providing a look into the internal works and values of the company) and to use the podcast to create an added value in society. In addition, a frequently mentioned goal was to create an Experience Brand, which suggests that companies do not use podcasts to promote their products or brand. Instead, the aim is to share expert knowledge and provide insight into the industry. This corresponds with the most frequently mentioned target group, the people interested in the topic, as well as the characteristics of podcasts as a medium of pull communication. Moreover, this result reflects a success factor for corporate podcasts identified by Huber et al. (2008): information value. In addition, the most frequent motives of podcast listeners investigated by Chan-Olmsted and Wang (2020) could be confirmed. The need for entertainment, information, and continuing education are cited by companies as the most common reasons for listening to podcasts.

The choice of format for corporate podcasts seems to often be derived from the objectives pursued. Thus, companies with the goal of positioning themselves as experts in a subject area opted for the expert interview. Companies whose goal was to present themselves as particularly innovative, however, wanted to stand out from the competition by implementing more elaborate formats such as the fiction podcast. It is striking at this point that the younger podcasts in the sample in particular opted for a more elaborate format and that a more strategic approach can also be found across further planning steps compared to the rest of the sample. Overall, these findings lead to the following hypothesis:

H2. *The objectives pursued with the corporate podcast determine the choice of format*.

Regarding the planning of advertising measures to publicize the corporate podcast, the results show that the podcast episodes were advertised on all channels listed by Krugmann and Pallus (2008, pp. 96-97). In particular, the communication channels listed in more recent sources, such as social media, paid advertisements, and a dedicated landing page, can be found in the information provided by the companies surveyed (Hammerschmidt, 2020, pp. 128-129, 137; Schreyer, 2019, p. 32).

With regard to RQ2, to what extent corporate podcasts are based on strategic planning, it was evident across the individual planning steps that the podcast as a communication tool is still a relatively new channel for most companies. Due to its characteristics, the podcast format differs from other classic communication channels, which is why individual planning steps also seem to differ. However, particularly in the case of the newer podcasts in the sample, some of the planning steps seemed to be thought through more strategically and derived from the knowledge conducted in the situation analysis priorly.

Looking at RQ3 and the criteria that are taken into account in the implementation, it becomes clear that despite some recommendations from the literature, there do not yet seem to be any regulations for the best possible implementation that are applied equally by all companies. Nevertheless, it can be observed that the realization of corporate podcasts seems to be linked closely to the different objectives of the respective company. This is reflected, for example, in the selection of topics for the individual episodes. The selected topic can often be considered as the basis for further strategic decisions. For example, those companies whose podcast topics are directly related to the company's core business preferentially choose their own employees as podcast guests. One presumed intention behind this approach could be to underscore the company's desired role as an expert. Another strategic connection can be seen on the basis of the results between the selection of topics and the time planning. The surveyed companies either chose to distribute podcasts on current topics, or make regular publication their priority. Here, topics that are detached from current events can be planned further in advance and are sometimes scheduled as "buffer episodes" in order to be able to keep to the publication rhythm. Accordingly, the hypothesis can derived:

> H3. *The more current the topics covered in the podcast, the shorter the time horizon for planning the individual episodes*.

In addition to the timing of the podcast publication, the choice of distribution platforms was considered by many companies. Here, too, the results from the literature coincide with the findings obtained from the survey and appear to be broadly similar across all interviews (see Hammerschmidt, 2020, pp. 130-131; Krugmann & Pallus, 2008, p. 130).

Regarding the monitoring of results in the context of RQ4, it is noticeable that clear quantitative KPIs were rarely set as objectives in advance to the development of the podcast. This finding does not correspond with the statements by Zerfass (2014), according to whom the objectives should clearly be set in advance and should be reviewed as part of the results monitoring process (p. 69). This observation can also be justified by the lack of experience with the medium, which makes a prior assessment difficult, for example with regard to a desirable reach and an appropriate number of subscribers. As a result, the monitoring of results was less concerned with checking for the fulfillment of predefined goals but instead aimed at a more general monitoring of the individual episodes in order to observe the timely development and to gain a feeling for the medium. However, it can be assumed that the regularly collected key figures will serve as a measure of success in future seasons and thus will also possibly have an influence on further situation analysis and planning. In addition to the number of streams and subscribers, the listen-through-rate was mentioned as the most important qualitative metric for monitoring results, as fewer listeners who engage intensively with the podcast were considered more valuable than a large number of consumers who quickly switch off again.

Feedback from listeners was named as the most important qualitative method for monitoring results, however, that feedback does not often seem to be actively gathered by the companies. Rather, the assessment of listeners' perceptions is based on feedback that reaches the podcast managers unsolicited, for example in the form of comments on social media platforms. Thus, at least in some areas, the qualitative methods for monitoring results do not seem to be strategically well founded and need further development. Over the course of the interviews, it was often critically emphasized that the result control is accompanied by some challenges, which could explain the mostly not strategically made decisions. It was frequently mentioned that podcast operators do not have sufficient access to the data surrounding their podcast. Among other things, this is reflected in non-transparent rankings, which also means that producers cannot compare their own success with that of others (Morris, 2021, p. 3). Hypothetically, it can be assumed at this point that:

> H4. *Better access to data also goes hand-in-hand with an increased and more active KPI setting*.

This is due to the fact that increased access to data gives companies a point of reference for their podcast success.

Some overlaps with recommendations from Zerfass (2014) were also found in the context of process control. Most companies seem to carry out operational process control, however, the attributed importance varies greatly: While some companies were unfamiliar with the term process control, others informally discussed the process and gave feedback after each episode, yet others only implemented a process control when a problem was actively noticed.

In summary, to answer RQ4, all companies surveyed perform both success and process control of their corporate podcast. However, the extent of the strategy behind the control varies greatly from company to company, which could be related to the question of the extent to which the corporate podcast should actually be integrated into a company's communications mix or whether the podcast is still considered to be an experiment. This assumption could be tested as part of future research.

8 Limitations

When interpreting the findings of the given study, some limitations need to be considered. Firstly, the literature review revealed a prevailing theoretical focus of the state of research with a lack of empirical work on corporate podcasts. Therefore, in the context of this study, the theoretical considerations of Krugmann and Pallus (2008) on the strategic management of corporate podcasts were mainly used for operationalization, with the inclusion of other sources. However, the study as a whole lacks a more in-depth theoretical background. Furthermore, due to the lack of similar studies on the topic of corporate podcasts, the results cannot be sufficiently discussed and put into perspective.

The sampling of the present study is another aspect that must be critically reflected upon. Using a qualitative research design is always accompanied by comparatively small samples. No representative data in the statistical sense were collected. The results can therefore only be claimed for the individual respondents. Furthermore, the selection of the sample is limited to companies with the highest turnover in Germany. Hence, no conclusions can be drawn about the podcasting process among small and medium-sized companies or companies that are established in other countries. As already described in the framework of the method, the quality criterion of intercoder reliability, which is suitable for content analytic research, was implemented in the context of this study. In contrast, intracoder reliability was neglected. Ensuring intracoder reliability could have increased the quality of the research project.

9 Conclusion and Further Research

Corporate podcasts represent an innovative form of pull communication with a particularly involved and interested target group which is primarily young and educated with a high purchasing power. Due to the fact that the audio medium meets today's recipients desire for a flexible and self-determined media consumption, corporate podcasts will continue to gain relevance in the future. Despite their increasing importance, the literature review showed that there is still a lack of current, well-founded findings on corporate podcasts, their implementation and effects. Thus, this paper aimed at examining the trend medium of podcasts in external corporate communication. By determining the extent to which companies in Germany implement corporate podcasts along the four phases of strategic communication management in external corporate communication, the study provides one of the first scientific inputs for the newly emerging field of research on corporate podcasts.

Altogether, it was shown that the implementation of corporate podcasts along the lines of strategic communication management still has room for development. Due to the novelty of the usage for organizational purposes, experience is still being gathered. While the planning and implementation phases are already well thought out strategically, there is a lack of strategy in the situation analysis and control.

Almost all companies conducted neither a differentiated competitor analysis nor an auditory analysis ahead of the concepts development. Especially in view of the fact that podcasts can have an effect via acoustic stimuli that are associated with the brand, decisions on acoustic design should not be left to chance. A first step for companies here would be to deal more consciously with their own acoustic brand positioning and to implement an auditory analysis as a fixed component of the situation analysis in practice.

As podcasts are a medium that is able to hit the current nerve of times, it is important that companies really think through the podcasting process strategically. In view of the experimental nature of podcasts, it is advisable to have a more consistent process control and to record the insights gained from the start onward in order to build up knowledge step by step. With regard to the control of results and the problem of lack of comparability often mentioned in this context, more transparency must be created on the market in the future and corresponding usage data must be made available by the streaming platforms. In addition, there is a need for overarching guidelines and standards which could give orientation to those responsible for corporate podcast communications.

The study also shows that companies are aware of the increasing importance of podcasts. Overall, however, there is agreement that corporate podcasts are not a substitute for other means of communication, but rather complement the variety of communication options. Altogether, it can be assumed that a more strategic approach, particularly in the first and last phases of communication management and the associated greater integration of corporate podcasts into the communications mix, will allow the potential of the audio format to be developed more broadly and podcasts to be used more successfully to achieve corporate goals.

Next to these valuable insights, the above-mentioned limitations of the study can be used as a starting point for further research on the strategic use of corporate podcasts. To begin with, future research could quantitatively verify the results and hypotheses obtained in this study to ensure their representativeness. In addition, prospective studies could target the strategic implementation of corporate podcasts in small and medium-sized companies and above that, take a look beyond Germany's national borders. In particular, a more in-depth comparison with the U.S. represents an attractive research project, since here corporate podcasts have been used as a communication tool for a longer period of time and in line with this, more expertise has been built up.

All in all, as the popularity of the medium grows, so will the research field of corporate podcasts, where there are currently still many gaps to be filled. Having this study's results in mind, it remains interesting to observe if and to what extent the strategic communication management of corporate podcasts will become more professional in Germany.

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WHEN ROBOTS WRITE THE NEWS

A Guideline Based Interview Study on Opportunities and Risks of Using Artificial Intelligence in Political Reporting in Germany and the U.S.

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Abstract

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is increasingly being implemented in journalism, possibly leading to various fundamental changes within the field. Especially the forerunner countries U.S. and Germany make use of the technologies in several sub-sectors of reporting. While pioneer-studies exploring said implementation have focused on audience, as well as practitioners' perceptions of AI, a focus on the democratically crucial political journalism is lacking. Therefore, the given paper investigates how those working in the journalistic field in Germany and the U.S. evaluate AI-usage in political reporting. Scopes, contexts, and opportunities, as well as risks of the technologies are considered. Eleven interviews with experts from leading news organizations were conducted and analyzed using a qualitative content analysis, focusing on comparisons between the two countries. Results show varying strategies of AI implementation within the two countries, with election coverage being the predominant political topic reported on with the help of AI. Furthermore, the findings show that AI could possibly free journalists from routine tasks, and allows for more in-depth and large-scale research, which in turn could lead to an increase in the qualitative standard of political journalism. However, journalists also point towards ethical and economic concerns. Considering the results, directions for future research and the practice of journalism are discussed.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, AI, journalism, political journalism, Germany, U.S.

1 The Role of Artificial Intelligence in Journalism

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is playing an increasingly important role in the whole of society. The simulation of human intelligence, precisely algorithms and machine learning processes with little to no human intervention based on large amounts of data, can be found in many subsectors of our day-to-day lives (Kreutzer & Sirrenberg, 2019, p. 3; Loosen & Solbach, 2020, p. 177; Mainzer, 2016, p. 2). As such, studies show that communicative AI could change both the production and consumption of news fundamentally (see for example in Caswell & Dörr, 2018; Loosen & Solbach, 2020, p. 177).

Automated writing and researching processes, analysis of user data for generation of personalized news content, and natural language generation can and will be found in more news outlets in the future (Kreutzer & Sirrenberg, 2019, pp. 28-29; Loosen & Solbach, 2020, pp. 178-179; Túñez-López, Toural-Bran & Cacheiro-Requeijo, 2018, p. 755). As journalism allows for opinion- and will-formation and entails critical democratic functions, such as informing a society of developments (DJV, 2020), research on the effects of AI on journalism is societally relevant. A focus on political journalism is needed in future studies. Political journalism, in the context of this paper, is understood following Lüneborg and Sell (2018, pp. 4-14) as going beyond the department of "politics" and as describing the professional public discussion of the political, of power relations, of participation within a society, and of political actors, their actions, and related consequences, in analog and digital media (DJV, 2020).

Pioneer-research within the field considering audience perspectives on the technologies concludes that AI written journalism is perceived as more objective and trustworthy than journalistic content written by humans (Graefe, Haarman & Brosius, 2018, pp. 603-606; Wu, 2020, pp. 1018-1019). As pressure on news media in Western countries to act against accusations of fake news and populism is increasing, AI could offer a fruitful pathway in future news making, which needs to be considered. Furthermore, studies suggest that the grade of implementation varies greatly between outlets and countries (Napoli, 2014, p. 353; Túñez-López et al., 2018, p. 753). This makes an international comparative analysis of forerunner nations relevant. Within these countries, expert perspectives from those working within the field and with AI could offer worthwhile insights. Studies considering such expert perspectives, however, do not focus on AI in political journalism explicitly and largely research the implementation in countries with little usage of the technologies (see for example Jamil, 2020; Montal & Reich, 2017). Based on the societal, timely, and scholarly relevance of the topic, as well as the discussed research gap, the given paper therefore asks the following research-leading question:

> *How do those working within the journalistic field in Germany and the U.S. evaluate AI-usage in political reporting?*

The two countries are examined here, as previous research characterizes them as leading in AI-implementation within newsrooms (Túñez-López et al., 2018, p. 753).

To answer the question, an explorative approach was chosen. Following a systematic literature review and the formulation of subordinate research questions, which are described in the first, theoretical part of the paper, qualitative guideline-based expert interviews were conducted. The empirical part of the paper discusses the chosen method as well as the operationalization and the results which were analyzed using a qualitative content analysis. They are then set into relation with previous research and hypotheses are formulated. Finally, limitations are considered, and a conclusion gives insights into the implications for future research and the practice of journalism.

2 Theory/Prior Evidence

As public debates about Artificial Intelligence have been unfolding over the last years, scholarly attention likewise turned to examine impact and effects of AI usage in media and communication contexts. Although research on this matter has been highly insightful, the use of AI in communication contexts continues to be an ever-changing issue which appears extremely difficult to grasp. Loosen and Solbach (2020) emphasize the need for simultaneously addressing the issue at the level of public discourse and scientific debate. Turning to mass media is particularly important in that regard. In fact, mass media takes on a vital role as a hybrid actor both informing the public about the issues that cling to AI, creating expectations and at the same time being subject to direct AI implementation in journalistic practices and organizations (Brennen, Howard & Nielsen, 2020, p. 2). As an initial overview, Diakopolous (2019) examines the structural changes that swept over the field of journalism through algorithms.

Due to the relative newness of AI as a phenomenon and the vast rapidity of its spread, research up to now has predominantly been driven by empirical findings. On the contrary, theoretical conceptualizations and incorporations into existing theories are rather rare. Exceptions consider automated journalism following an institutional approach or in a human-machine-framework (Napoli, 2014 respectively Lewis, Guzman & Schmidt, 2019). Dörr (2016, pp. 5-6) offers the useful distinction between input, throughput and output as three stages where an automated software such as Natural Language Generation (NLG) can operate. This was drawn upon and elaborated further by Loosen & Solbach (2020, p. 181), who incorporated AI in the traditional News Circle. Here the process is divided into observation, production, distribution and use and the overarching stages of data generation, data processing and data interpretation. AI use prevails in distribution and personalization, hence, it is mostly used for economic factors. However, it can be of crucial importance on other stages such as the pattern verification and data processing in projects like the Panama Papers (Stray, 2019, p. 1092), which according to Diakopolous (2019) "illustrates the power of combining human knowledge and expertise with the capabilities of machines to cope with an immense scale of data" (p. 14). Beyond that, AI can alter selection processes as it "can help find stories humans would miss" (Stray, 2019, p. 1093). Overall, Loosen and Solbach argue that, as an effect of the increasing relevance of data journalism, dimensions of the News Circle become more closely intertwined (p. 193). Thus, it is the task of empirical research to continuously investigate these interconnections in practice and to offer a comprehensive view on the changing nature and growing complexity of journalistic practices.

In recent years, several studies have explored different aspects of AI in journalism that can be divided into two broad domains of scholarly interest, one being the perspective of the communicator ("who"), while the other focuses on audience's perception ("to whom"). Both realms of research offer important insights to unravel the mechanisms that advance and those that hinder AI usage in journalism generally and in certain domains of reporting in particular.

The investigation of the audience's perception of AI implementation concentrates on the production stage and on how AI generated texts are assessed by readers. Several studies yield positive results in terms of different aspects of quality, specifically the perceived objectivity, credibility, and readability (Clerwall, 2014; Graefe, Heim, Haarmann & Brosius, 2018; Wu, 2020). Thus, participants either declare no considerable differences between the texts, or rate the texts that were generated automatically as more credible and more objective. Although these criteria – particularly one that encompasses the extremely contested journalistic objectivity need to be critically (re-)evaluated – it initially demonstrates the competitiveness of computer-generated news with human written ones at least "for routine tasks for which there are well-structured, machine-readable, and reliable data" (Graefe et al., 2018, p. 605).

Yet, to consider the limited scope of these findings, as mentioned by Graefe et al. (2018), seems undoubtedly essential. The reliance of AI on data suggests that not all areas of journalism will benefit from it in the same way. In his experimental study, Wu (2020) examined the audience's perception of articles covering issues from sports, finance, and politics. Comparing solely the human-written stories he found the political news stories to be evaluated as more biased than those in finance and sports. This points to a general problem of political journalism as it appears more susceptible to (assumed) bias which is fostered by extreme polarization of political systems as well as media systems. Hence, such developments might even increase the need to find different approaches to a more "objective" political reporting that can effectively tackle (human) bias. It seems important to consider political journalism as a possible field of AI use due to its vital role and its rather complex nature.

While the studies on audience's reception bring considerable results, it is indispensable to take into account the assessment of AI in journalism of experts such as journalists who already use or are expected to use AI in the future. This allows to gain further insights into this extremely volatile field of research and to elaborate predictions of the future use of AI in journalism. In the context of their findings, Montal & Reich (2017) point towards the so-called AI gap which showed the discrepancy between scientific literature and experts of when to use the term "AI". The participants of their study unanimously recognized the "human nature of authorship even for algorithmic news" (Montal & Reich, 2017, p. 841), whereas automated journalism is seen as self-learning in the literature. This clearly demonstrates the blurred lines and the difficulty of drawing distinctions between AI, algorithms and automated tools of journalism that can only be overcome by further research and more differentiated knowledge about how AI is being used.

In a series of qualitative interviews with managers, journalists, and programmers, Lindén (2017) sought to make predictions about computer-generated news by asking experts for their assessment of the technologies. His findings indicate clear differences between media outlets. As one of the forerunner outlets in terms of AI use, the news agency Associated Press (AP) benefits from AI since monotonous and error-prone tasks can be taken on by automated software. Yet, other companies emphasize risks associated with the technologies, e.g. fear of job losses. Thus, AI can have very different effects: "This study [...] has primarily shown how the work of journalists is empowered and supplemented, but also replaced by smart machines"

(Lindén, 2017, p. 72). It becomes quite clear that comparisons between different media outlets are needed to yield more extensive results into the issue.

Having conducted interviews with Spanish journalists Túñez López et al. (2018) outlined structural differences in AI use depending on the country. According to their study, the U.S., Germany, and the UK have the highest concentration of media outlets that use automated news writing. For Germany, it is predominantly used for finance and sports coverage while in U.S.-American outlets there appeared to be more diverse settings of use. The author's findings suggest that Spanish journalists were (at that point in time) not aware of the importance of AI in journalism and therefore not inclined to reconsider their (intervening) role in the news producing process (Túñez López et al., 2018, p. 756). This repeatedly highlights the need to continuously include journalists' perspectives in further research.

Similarly, though set in a completely different country context, Jamil (2020) interviewed Pakistani journalists about their attitudes towards the use of AI. He contrasts the non-Western perspective against the Western one where "artificial intelligence is taking place in newsrooms and journalistic routines through automated data tracking (e.g. Reuter's News Tracker) and data extraction (e.g., BBC's Juicer), fast data collection (e.g., the New York Times' Editor)" (Jamil, 2020, p. 8). For the Pakistani context he conceptualizes AI technologies as moderators or intermediaries. As the most prevalent factors to hinder AI use Jamil (2020) lists: economic resources, inaccuracy of data, no access to data, lack of federal policy to promote AI as well as a lack of training for journalists to use AI and the digital divide in Pakistan. Despite some of the problems being specifically related to the Pakistani (or non-Western) contexts this arguably bears relevant implications for other studies as well.

In his 2019 report New powers, new responsibilities, Beckett discusses the findings of a global survey with journalists from 32 different countries. He highlights the possibility of creating more resources for more complex journalism through AI use while it can also help to navigate through "news overload and misinformation"

(Beckett, 2019, p. 89). This study's results line up accordingly with what other scholars have pointed out in smaller contexts.

3 Research Questions

Departing from the overarching question that principally guided the research "How do journalists and editorial staff members from the U.S. and Germany assess the use of Artificial Intelligence in political journalism?", subsequent research questions have been derived based on the previous research.

The specific focus on a detailed comparison of two forerunner countries of AI use in journalism seeks to yield interesting results for media developments in the respective countries. Thus, already existing knowledge can be extended and deepened as well as previous assumptions can be updated (Beckett, 2019; Túñez López et al., 2018). By examining political journalism as one particularly substantial field of reporting it is also possible to obtain a more in-depth understanding of opportunities and risks of AI use and to gain a more sophisticated view on the issue at hand.

The first subordinate research question is:

> *RQ 1:* To what extent do German and U.S.-American journalists and editorial staff members use AI in political reporting?

So far little is known about AI in political reporting. Therefore, it is important to firstly explore how far reaching the use generally is. The second research question seeks to gain insight into areas of AI use. This is relevant to categorize AI qualities more comprehensively and refers back to the different stages of the News Circle to identify the differing degrees of human influences in the news producing process.

> *RQ 2:* In what fields and contexts is AI typically used in political reporting in Germany and the U.S. and why?

Drawing upon evidence from prior studies (e.g., Beckett, 2019; Caswell & Dörr, 2018; Dörr & Hollnbuchner, 2017; Lindén, 2017) the research questions 3 and 4 encompass opportunities and risks of AI use. By examining opportunities and risks in political reporting it is not only possible to further assess what fosters and what hinders AI generally, but also to comprehend the premises and principles of political journalism.

> *RQ 3:* What opportunities do German and U.S.-American journalists and editorial staff members see in the use of AI in political reporting?

> *RQ 4:* What risks do German and U.S.-American journalists and editorial staff members see in the use of AI in political reporting?

4 Method

To answer the research questions presented above, an explorative approach was chosen. The method applied comprises guideline-based expert interviews combined with a qualitative content analysis conducted through online zoom interviews. The sample drawn for this study consists of journalists and editorial staff members, five of whom are U.S.-American and six of whom are German. The media outlets they work for are well-known newspapers and TV networks, many of which are leading in the implementation of AI, including the Süddeutsche Zeitung (SZ), Norddeutscher Rundfunk (NDR), Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk (MDR), Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ), Rheinische Post (RP) Online and Bayerischer Rundfunk (BR) on the German side. On the U.S.-American side, participants work for The Washington Post, the Associated Press (AP), the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), The Wall Street Journal and Business Insider. An overview of the interview partners, all of whom approved the publishing of their names and positions, can be found in table 1.

German Media Outlet	Name	Positions relevant for this research
ZDF	N/A	Freelance journalist
SZ	Johannes Klingebiel	Employee in the innovations team
MDR	Gunter Neumann	Head of the MDR online editorial team, head of "MDR Wahlzone", a TV program specialized in election coverage
ARD/ NDW	Svea Eckert	Freelance journalist
BR	Cecile Schneider	Product Lead @BR AI and Automation Lab
FAZ	Thomas Schultz-Homberg	Head of the online editorial team from 2013-2020
RP Online	Clemens Broisserée	Head of redactional product development, thematic focus: AI and data journalism

U.S. Media Outlet	Name	Positions relevant for this research
NBC	Gregg Birnbaum	Assistant Managing Editor for Politics
Associated Press	Lisa Gibbs	Director of news partnerships
The Washington Post	Jeremy Gilbert	Current Knight Chair of Digital Marketing Strategy @Northwestern University Medill School; previously Director of Strategic Initiatives @The Washington Post and Executive Editor for Digital Strategies @National Geographic
The Wall Street Journal	Francesco Marconi	Co-founder of Applied XL, previously, Research and Development-Chief @Wall Street Journal
Business Insider	John Haltiwanger	Senior Politics Reporter

Table 1: Overview of the interview partners.

The prerequisites for participation included that the participants had to be able to assess the use of AI in political reporting through experience working with the technology or on another knowledge base. They had to have worked for a media outlet in the past or presently and were recruited via LinkedIn, Xing, Twitter, and personal or business contact information. From 19 contacted German journalists and editorial staff members, seven agreed to participate in an interview, which is why all interviews with the German participants were conducted within six weeks until the end of January. The recruitment of U.S.-journalists turned out to be much more difficult. Over the course of three months, 63 possible participants were reached out to, however, until mid-March only five participants could be interviewed. The majority of the contact attempts remained unanswered, three persons explained their declination referring to current political events such as the storming of the capitol on January 6th, 2021, the inauguration of the new U.S. president and the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.

According to the predefined quota plan, the goal was to interview equal amounts of men and women. To achieve a heterogeneous sample, one third of the interviewees were to come from each TV stations, regional and national newspapers. The sampling as well as the cross-sectional design of the study ensure that the use of AI in political reporting in the U.S. and Germany between mid-December 2020 and mid-March 2021 can be analyzed using a case comparison of both countries. Since the use of AI only changes in the long term, the research findings are valid beyond said timeframe.

The interview guideline preset included seven introductory questions and 13 open test questions concerning two different subjects: the extent (RQ1) and the areas and contexts of the use of AI (RQ2) as well as possible opportunities (RQ3) and risks (RQ4), partially regarding AI in political journalism in particular. The interviews were conducted via Zoom between December 10th, 2020, and March 12th, 2021, and evaluated using a qualitative content analysis, which required a deductive category system developed based on previous research and supplemented by inductive subcategories. After answering the introductory questions, participants were firstly asked to specify their personal experience with AI in journalism, the use of AI in their editorial offices and in what way or in which projects AI is usually being brought into action in their workplace, as well as in political journalism in general. By questioning the participants about journalism in general and political journalism in particular, the results can provide a more in-depth and comprehensive overall-picture of the use of AI in both environments.

During the second part of the interview, participants were asked to assess the risks and opportunities that might emerge from the use of AI. Interviewees were asked to what extent AI changes their work as well as work in the field of political journalism in general. Potential risks and opportunities were identified by asking about the participant's expectations regarding the advancement of AI in the next five years and how they experienced the first time they applied artificially intelligent technologies. Further questions assessed the advantages and disadvantages, the hopes and concerns participants might have towards AI in journalism and in how far they expect journalists to be replaced by self-learning softwares in the future. The interviews were not conducted and analyzed by the same researcher to ensure the study's objectivity. Furthermore, a pretest was conducted with one German participant.

5 Results

The results of the study are evaluated and presented on the basis of the four research questions. The differences and similarities between German and American journalists and media companies will be discussed.

5.1 RQ1: Extent of Use of AI in Political Reporting

The majority of the interviewees from German and U.S. media outlets had already come into contact with AI in the context of journalism at the time of the interviews. Only one interviewee from Germany (NDR) and one interviewee from the U.S. (NBC) had never encountered AI in their day-to-day work. The NBC journalist explains that AI as a tool in journalism is still too far away for him:

> I don‘t use artificial intelligence directly as a tool to do my profession. It‘s not a direct tool that I‘m engaged with. It probably is something that is one or two rungs or three rungs out from where I am (Birnbaum, NBC)

The German journalist from NDR gives a similar justification, saying that "[...] there is simply no scope for it yet" (Eckert, NDR). The interviewees from the German media Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Süddeutsche Zeitung and Bayerischer Rundfunk and those from the American media houses The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal and Associated Press view this quite differently. Here, artificial intelligence is already regularly being deployed in a variety of ways in different areas. At FAZ and BR, for example, AI is used on a daily basis. Similarly, the Associated Press "has a pretty wide portfolio of projects that are using different kinds of machine learning or [...] text generation solutions" (Gibbs, Associated Press). Artificial intelligence is used less at Rheinische Post and MDR in Germany and Business Insider in the U.S. In the case of the Rheinische Post, AI is only used in certain areas, such as traffic reports and news related to the Covid-19 pandemic, while the MDR interviewee describes having dealt with AI in a variety of larger and smaller projects. At Business Insider, too, there has been little use of AI until now. AI is only used in the editorial department in form of an automatic transcription program. In general, artificial intelligence is mainly used on a project-related basis in Germany, and on a more cross-project basis in the U.S.

In the specific context of political reporting, the extent of the use of AI in German as well as American media houses is still relatively small. The interviewee from Rheinische Post confirms:

> If you focus on political reporting, and also what is the focus in political reporting, i.e. interviews with political leaders, with ministers or [...] in-depth, exclusive, investigative reports about political events, then the influence of AI [...] in the context of journalism is to be assessed quite low from my side (Boisserée, Rheinische Post).

However, elections offer a potentially large field for the use of AI within political reporting. The Washington Post, for example, is using AI tools regularly to cover U.S. elections since 2016. In Germany, both the Rheinische Post and MDR conducted an AI-based project in the context of the 2017 federal election (MDR) and the 2020 local election in North Rhine-Westphalia (Rheinische Post), respectively. Otherwise, AI in political reporting, both in Germany and the U.S., is used, similarly as in other journalistic departments, as a tool to simplify research or to provide readers with an optimal, personalized offer based on their data. The Associated Press employee explains the low use of AI in the field of political journalism as follows: “I think that in areas like political reporting, which can be so polarized and sensitive, I would say that concerns about the risk of error would give us pause, we would not want to take that risk“ (Gibbs, Associated Press). Most of the AI projects or applications in the German media companies have only emerged within the last three years and are therefore still relatively new. The interviewed staff member from SZ describes the process of implementing AI in the newsroom as “gradual“. Media outlets in the U.S. have been using artificial intelligence in journalism for a longer period of time. The Washington Post and the Associated Press, for example, have been using the technology since around 2016 and are continuously working on developing and improving AI technologies:

> The Post has a data science team. The Post has the newsroom product team. And [...] my old team continues to look at lots of different ways to look at AI and automation, to try and improve things for the newsroom, to improve things for news consumers. (Gilbert, The Washington Post)

Almost all interviewees agree that AI will definitely play a role in the future of journalism and implementation should therefore be expanded. Nevertheless, the interviewee from MDR in Germany, for example, also sees obstacles to the implementation of AI: “I think that the technical requirements and the financial requirements for this are still relatively difficult at MDR“ (Neumann, MDR). The Business Insider interviewee in the U.S. believes that AI still receives too little attention: “It‘s just not really on our radar as a big concern yet. It‘s kind of a blip, that maybe we should pay a bit more attention to“ (Haltiwanger, Business Insider). Media companies that are already using AI are, in most cases, also looking to expand the technology further. Those that have not yet used AI within their operations usually have no plans to do so in the future. Nevertheless, a fundamental interest in the technology is evident among all interviewees.

5.2 RQ2: Domains, Contexts, and Reasons for Using AI in Political Reporting

Artificial intelligence does not yet play a significant role within political reporting in Germany and the U.S. Rather, the technology is mostly used as a kind of tool or aid to make journalists‘ work easier. A large field of application for AI in the context of political reporting opens up, for example, in the processing of large amounts of data. At the Süddeutsche Zeitung in Germany, a machine learning system has been developed for this purpose specifically. Political journalists can use this tool, for instance, to identify connections between politicians and other people or networks (Klingebiel, SZ). The reasons for using this technology are, on the one hand, to make the journalists‘ work easier and to save them time, but also on the other hand due to the personal motivation of some employees: “People think it‘s cool! [...] And people are curious and want to experiment with it. And that is an absolutely fair and justified motivation“ (Klingebiel, SZ). At the Associated Press in the U.S., for example, an algorithm is used to scan social media for breaking news. The news found, which are then found, are either verified or the algorithm recognizes whether it originates from a bot. The interviewee cites the time saved for journalists as the main reason for this use (Gibbs, Associated Press).

Another potentially large area of application for artificial intelligence is article or data generation. At The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, and the Associated Press in the U.S., AI is used primarily in sports or financial and business reporting. However, The Washington Post also uses automated article and data generation in the wake of U.S. political elections or when reporting on campaign finance. For political elections such as the U.S. presidential election, The Washington Post utilizes AI to generate stories that are automatically updated based on newly incoming results, in real time. In addition, they use an AI tool to automatically play out this information simultaneously across multiple channels and a combination of AI and geo-location to send personalized email newsletters to readers based on their location. At the Rheinische Post in Germany, automatically generated articles on the current Covid-19 pandemic situation are being issued to readers on a regular basis.

The FAZ in Germany uses artificial intelligence primarily within the application area of analytics, user data and personalization. In the FAZ.net app, an AI machine-learning combination plays out topics tailored specifically to users based on their specified data and interests. According to the interviewee from FAZ, the reason for this is the “basic need among people to receive personalized content, because that is what they are now used to in the digitalized world of their everyday lives“ (Schultz-Homberg, FAZ).

In addition to these three major areas, AI is also applied within political journalism in the areas of language and translations as well as pattern recognition and verification. SZ and BR in Germany and Business Insider, Associated Press and The Washington Post in the U.S., for example, utilize AI in the form of automatic transcription software to transcribe interviews faster and thus save journalists’ time. At BR and MDR, the moderation of user comments is also partially taken over by an AI to simplify the work of employees. Similarly, The Washington Post relies on another AI application in the area of language. With the help of a self-developed “style checker“, articles are scanned for inappropriate words, spelling or grammatical errors in order to adapt them to the basic writing style of The Washington Post. The reason here is also a lower expenditure of time and the general support of journalists by an AI (Gilbert, The Washington Post).

5.3 RQ3: Opportunities of Using AI in Political Reporting

The interviews revealed that German as well as U.S. newsroom members anticipate major potentials for AI in political reporting. Four aspects emerged in which the interviewees see the greatest opportunities: AI is seen as a tool that offers additional research and verification possibilities as well as new opportunities for personalization. Also, it could increase the general qualitative standard of political reporting.

One major advantage is that AI allows for time saving and can take over routine tasks. The three most important contexts where AI can be helpful in saving time are a) automating election results and articles, b) making information available to journalists by processing large amounts of data, and c) transcribing interviews to help journalists work faster and more efficiently. AI can be used to systematically and quickly sift through vast data sets in order to gain new insights or discover new stories: Hence, AI can “make things visible that were previously invisible, make injustices or biases visible [...] [and] can point to grievances that were previously hidden“ (Eckert, NDR). Furthermore, the German data journalist from NDR and the U.S. journalists from the AP, The Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal see opportunities in the use of AI for verification and counteracting false information. Thus, information as well as images and videos can be cross-checked more quickly and reliably. The former The Wall Street Journal and Associated Press journalist also explains that AI in political journalism could help to counter subjective reporting. He describes this as follows:

> It‘s a complex domain where there‘s a lot of information and there‘s not a way of defining ground truth. Ground truth is basically a shared understanding of a certain topic by multiple people in organizations [...] So these types of tools, they help you quantify fields that are not quantifiable. And that‘s the appeal to using these techniques in political journalism, because otherwise it‘s all subjective and it becomes hyperpolarized (Marconi, The Wall Street Journal).

Another opportunity that was repeatedly mentioned is the personalization of content. Thus, AI in political journalism could “serve preferences recognized on the basis of personas, behavioral patterns [...] by playing content to people [...] depending on their interests, the time, the device, the place where they are“ (Schultz-Homberg, FAZ). The former journalist hopes to win back young readers in particular and to awaken political interest among younger generations. In addition, one could avoid writing past the reader. If readers become more interested in political content again, a higher profit can ultimately be generated if additional subscriptions are purchased.

Through the already mentioned advantages of saving time and creating resources for other activities, the new possibilities of research and verification as well as the creation of personalized content, a higher qualitative standard of political journalism could also be achieved. AI can take over repetitive, scalable and routine tasks for journalists quickly and efficiently, giving the journalists more time for complex, creative stories that cannot be created by machines. This division of labor could be described as a hybrid human machine approach and is summarized by the interviewed The Washington Post Journalist as follows:

> A.I. storytelling, is not around creating thousands and thousands of machine generated stories. It's around an approach that is a customization of hybrid human and machine written stories. I think that the nearterm long term future very much lies in that (Gilbert, The Washington Post).

Moreover, AI can help to prevent human errors due to fatigue, which in turn can lead to an increase in the credibility of journalism, according to Schultz-Homberg from the FAZ. Other points that could enhance the quality of political journalism with the help of AI include considerations of how to use AI to counter biased reporting (Gibbs, AP; Marconi, The Wall Street Journal) and to investigate whether sources are diverse enough (Gilbert, Business Insider). In summary, German and U.S. editorial staff members see many opportunities in the use of AI in political journalism. Not least because of this, many of the editorial staff members surveyed believe that AI will play an increasingly important role in political journalism in the future.

5.4 RQ4: Risks of Using AI in Political Reporting

Even though the use of AI seems promising, the interviewees voice concerns that should not be ignored. Almost all of the German and U.S. interviewees stated that they consider the ethical challenges to be the greatest risk factor in the use of AI in political journalism. The lack of human judgment seems to be the main factor. For instance, data journalist Eckert from NDR states that political journalism is "also about assessing and classifying" topics, and this is precisely what AI cannot yet do: “classify and assess things.“ Several participants believe that the automation of political journalistic content is not feasible as this usually requires a very large commentary component and AI is not yet capable to understand and contextualize content:

> I think that nothing can really substitute a human reporter. You have to make ethical decisions in terms of how you frame an article, in terms of having an expertise on a subject building a beat ... They may give the straight information, but there‘s context. I think that‘s really vital, that comes from experience, expertise and really caring about a subject and making sure that the full picture is presented to a reader (Haltiwanger, Business Insider).

Some of the interviewees even see a risk for democracy in the increased use of AI in political journalism. This is because political reporting can also have an influence on the perception of elections and parties meant to be elected by audiences (Schultz-Homberg, FAZ) and leaving this to a machine is seen by some interviewees as questionable, if not dangerous. Furthermore, wrong conclusions in the interpretation of data seem to be another risk (Eckert, NDR; Schneider, BR). It is therefore important not to blindly trust the technology and to understand how AI arrives at certain results. Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind that AI can also serve a certain bias (Marconi, The Wall Street Journal; Boisserée, Rheinische Post). According to the Associated Press journalist, it is therefore important to have an understanding of why and how AI is being used, which is why AP already uses an “ethical checklist for robot journalism“ (Gibbs, AP). Another ethical risk is a willfully damaging use of AI, for example to manipulate information. This also includes the dissemination of false information, as described by Schneider from BR and Eckert from NDR: “AI can also be used for things that are difficult for journalistic intelligence gathering“ (Schneider, BR), such as deep fakes, so that it ultimately “becomes more and more difficult to distinguish what is right [and] what is wrong“ (Eckert, NDR). Another risk, which is mainly mentioned by German editorial staff members, is the fear of being replaced by the new technology, resulting in losing their livelihood. The head of the MDR online editorial department as well as the journalist of the SZ consider this to be very realistic, since extensive activities in journalism can already be taken over by an AI. In general, however, it can be said that this fear is perceived very differently. As already mentioned, the majority of the editorial team members interviewed do not consider a complete replacement of journalists by AI a probable scenario, as they envision AI only as taking over supporting activities. In addition, working with AI in political journalism is complicated by a lack of resources. Many media companies, especially smaller ones, do not have the necessary economic and technical resources to initiate innovation processes. Furthermore, many members of the editorial staff and the companies themselves are skeptical about the new technology. Thus, the "understanding [for AI] is not there yet" (Neumann, MDR). Only the NBC journalist Birnbaum, who has not yet come into direct contact with AI in his work, expresses skepticism about AI on the part of the editorial staff members themselves. Beyond the aspect of mistrust AI can also cause false expectations:

> You [must] of course also always manage expectations very strongly. This can very quickly slip into one extreme or the other. Some think with AI, just snap once and it will solve all my problems. And others think [...] will I be made superfluous? Are the robots the new journalists and will I be out of a job? So in both cases you can say: No, neither will happen (Schneider, BR).

Consequently, AI is neither the solution to all problems nor the downfall of manual journalism. While AI in political journalism is still in its early stages of development, its benefits as well as risks should not be dramatically overstated. According to the AP Journalist Gibbs, AI is not "more complicated or disruptive" than other technologies. In summary, it can be stated that the use of AI is partly complicated not only by a lack of economic and technological resources and the necessary knowledge of journalists, but also by skepticism and false expectations of many editorial offices.

6 Discussion

As the analysis of the interviews shows, almost all interviewees have already come into direct contact with AI in the course of their work as journalists or editorial staff. The majority of media outlets in Germany and the U.S. are already using AI in a variety of ways. Nevertheless, it was confirmed that the use of AI within political reporting is still quite low in both countries. Although the interviewees see many opportunities in the new technology, many of them also point out the risks of AI, especially within political reporting. The use of AI has therefore up to now been more common – especially in the U.S. – in the topic areas of sports or finance, as previous research has also shown (Caswell & Dörr, 2018). Nevertheless, one area within political reporting emerged as particularly suitable for the use of artificial intelligence. In both Germany and the U.S., AI is already being used in a variety of ways in the context of political elections – be it in the automated generation of news about current election results, the playout of this information to readers based on their location, or the simultaneous distribution of the news on different channels. In relation to research question 1, the following hypothesis can therefore be derived:

> *Hypothesis 1:* Within political journalism, artificial intelligence is used particularly in the area of political elections.

The areas and contexts of the use of artificial intelligence in political journalism are already diverse today. Based on the forms of (AI-based) automation in the journalistic news circle by Loosen and Sohlbach (2020, p. 181), it was possible to analyze and categorize the various areas of application. As a general aid, AI serves journalists primarily in the area of language and translation in the form of automatic transcription systems or spelling or "style checkers". However, AI offers even greater potential in the areas of data and article generation, processing of large volumes of data, as well as analytics, user data and personalization. Artificial intelligence is used in the form of search engines or algorithms for research, programs for automated text generation or in the personalized playout of articles to readers based on their interests. Data plays a major role in all these areas. AI can be of great help to journalists in processing, preparing or analyzing these usually large volumes of data. Therefore, with the ever-growing field of data journalism, it is very likely that AI will become more and more important in the future. Thus, another hypothesis, aligned with research question 2, is:

> *Hypothesis 2:* Artificial intelligence will be used in newsrooms primarily to process and systematize large amounts of data.

Furthermore, the results show that editorial staff members and journalists see many opportunities with regard to the use of AI in political journalism. In line with Beckett‘s (2019) study, it was pointed out that German and U.S. editors also see AI in political journalism as a tool that saves time and thus creates resources for other activities. Another opportunity identified was the personalization of content for recipients and the resulting acquisition or reacquisition of readers. Similar to the study by Stray (2019), it was also shown that the use of AI in political journalism primarily offers potential for research and verification, also to the extent that AI can find stories and information that humans might otherwise not discover (Stray, 2019, p. 1093). With the help of the new verification possibilities, the spread of false information could also be counteracted. Especially for political journalism, the division of labor between humans and AI seems to be of particular importance. AI can take over scalable, repetitive tasks, such as the transcription of interviews, the automated presentation of election results, or systematic research and verification. Journalists, on the other hand, will continue to be needed for the contextualization of information and the distribution of said information through specifically human written articles. This hybrid human machine approach gives journalists more time to work creatively and write articles with detailed background information. The aforementioned opportunities may ultimately result in increased content quality. Based on this, the following hypothesis in relation to research question 3 is formulated:

> *Hypothesis 3:* The use of AI in political journalism can increase the qualitative standard of political journalism.

Unlike existing research by Wu (2020), this increase in quality does not refer to higher objectivity or credibility of the articles. This was only mentioned marginally by the interviewees and would therefore have to be verified by further empirical studies with additional consideration of the recipient's perspective.

However, the use of AI should also be viewed critically with regard to the risks mentioned by the interviewees. Above all, the editorial staff and journalists see risks in the ethical challenges, lack of resources and false expectations of AI. It was found that the use of AI is partly complicated by a lack of economic and technological resources. In addition, some editorial teams are skeptical about its use. It also seems to be important to practice "expectation management" (Schneider, BR), since the findings point out that AI means neither the downfall of manual journalism nor is it the solution to all problems. The fear of being replaced by AI is rated only as a moderate risk by the editorial staff members but is considered to be more realistic by the German interviewees than by the U.S. editorial staff members. In contrast to the study by Lindén (2017, p. 67), the majority of the interviewees in this sample see human labor as irreplaceable for political journalism. These different findings can be explained by the need of human authorship in political journalism, due to its democratic function. A major risk seems to be the lack of human assessment and contextualization of information, which cannot (yet) be guaranteed by AI. This leads to the fourth hypothesis of this study:

> *H4:* The use of AI for automated article generation in political journalism appears to be unsuitable.

This contradicts considerations made at the beginning based on existing research by Wu (2020, pp. 1018-1022), whose study suggests a use of automated articles as beneficial, due to increased objectivity and credibility perceptions. However, this discrepancy can be attributed to the different perspectives: Wu's (2020) study cites the assumed increased objectivity on the part of recipients, while the present project deals with the perspective of journalists. Furthermore, Wu (2020) focuses on multiple departments of journalism, while only the democratically important political journalism is considered here. Nonetheless, the research results suggest that AI will play an increasingly important role in political journalism and has the potential to change the work of media professionals profoundly and permanently.

7 Limitations

While the discussion above shows the fruitful insights offered by the given study, limitations do, however, also need to be considered. Firstly, the sample of U.S. participants might have been distorted due to various reasons. Political events such as the storm of the capitol on January 6th 2021, the inauguration of President Biden, and the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic led to possible participants lacking the time for an interview, as some journalists responded. As the pool of potential interview partners in the U.S. seemed exhausted by the end of the recruitment phase, many of said interview partners did not coincide with the predefined quota plan, and for instance rather used to work in journalism but changed the sector. Due to the different media systems in both countries, public service broadcasters are not represented in the U.S. sample, but are over-represented in the German one.

Other limitations include the lack of a pretest for the English interview guideline, as one was only performed for the German version due to the lack of interview partners. Possible interviewer effects cannot be ruled out, as five researchers conducted the interviews. One incident in particular might have led to somewhat biased results: The interviewee who worked for The Wall Street Journal had to abort the interview before completion due to further appointments and handed in the remaining answers later, via email. The interview should not have been included in the evaluation but was incorporated anyways due to the low response rate on the side of U.S.-American journalists. Hence, the comparability with other interview results is only possible to a limited extent due to the asynchronous nature of the written answers and the lack of spontaneous questions. In addition to that, respondents often tended to make general statements about AI in journalism, which is why it is sometimes unclear whether or not the given answers focus specifically on political journalism.

8 Conclusion

The given paper researched the expert evaluation of AI implementation within German and U.S.-American news outlets in political journalism. Previous research was discussed, and subordinate research questions concerning the extent of the usage, the areas and contexts of AI implementation, and associated opportunities and risks were asked.

To answer the given questions, qualitative guideline-based interviews with five American and six German experts working in newsrooms were conducted and analyzed using a qualitative content analysis. Results were then discussed along the subordinate research questions: Within political journalism, outlets from both countries apply AI mostly within election coverage. Generally, German outlets tend to use AI in a more project-bound way, while American news organizations implicate the technology more generally in economics-, and sports-reporting. Findings here could be set into relation with the model of the news circle from previous research. The first hypothesis therefore suggests that AI is mostly being implemented within election coverage, in the context of political journalism.

The areas, contexts, and reasons for the usage of the technology are similar within both countries. With the help of AI large amounts of data can be processed, and the technology is used to generate articles, to take over transcription-, translation-, and personalization-tasks as well as for verification purposes. Findings from previous studies were therefore confirmed and extended: According to the interviewees, AI can be employed as a helpful tool. The second hypothesis states that AI is being used within newsrooms to process and systemize large amounts of data.

Perceived opportunities and risks were articulated transnationally. Opportunities in working with the technologies considered by the journalists are heightened research and verification resources, which can in turn make journalism less error-prone and increase its general quality. Furthermore, some interviewees view AI as a tool to enhance the trustworthiness and objectivity of the content, as well as personalization possibilities. Again, findings from previous studies could therefore be confirmed and extended: The interview partners suggest that AI will also play a larger role in political journalism in the future. The third hypothesis states that AI usage in political journalism allows for a heightened qualitative standard.

Risks, however, also exist in relation to the technologies. As human contextualization would be missing in articles solely generated by an AI, ethical concerns arise. Furthermore, a possible skepticism against the technology could hinder its implementation and missing economic and technological resources need to be considered. Contrary to previous research, however, especially American journalists here do not view their positions as in danger: Instead, the importance of human contextualization, especially in political journalism, is articulated.

The research-leading question of the paper can therefore be answered as follows: The interviewed experts are open to the implementation of AI in political journalism, though its usage is currently limited to election coverage. Perceived risks largely concern ethics and relate back to the democratic function of political journalism. Opportunities of the technologies, however, seem to outweigh those concerns. Overall, AI is seen as a tool, which could be increasingly used in the future to heighten the quality of journalism.

Although the research shows some limitations, the study's explorative approach can provide interesting insights into the usage and future of AI within journalism as well as give impulses for needed research. Future studies should include a larger sample and verify the hypotheses formulated here. Further international investigations with a more heterogeneous sample and a focus specifically on the realm of political journalism should be conducted.

In addition to being a starting point for further research, the given study provides implications for the practical field: Journalists and staff members should be trained specifically to work with AI, familiarizing them with the associated opportunities and risks, to offer them the opportunity to use AI's potentials while avoiding its downfalls. Points made within this paper could be used as a starting point. Furthermore, skepticism within news outlets needs to be reduced, to allow for a productive use of the technologies, and economic solutions for implementation of the technologies in smaller news outlets need to be found. Lastly, hybrid approaches using both the strengths of automated news production and additional human contextualization should be furthered.

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WE ARE LISTENING TO YOU (AS GOOD AS WE CAN)

A Qualitative Study on the Potential of Internal Corporate Social Listening as a Strategic Approach for Corporate Communication

Niklas Feierabend, Anna Fischer, Sara Fuchs, Christine Krakau, Hannah Kurtze, Robin Wassermann

Abstract

The aim of this research is to identify the potential of internal corporate Social Listening for corporate communications. To this end, the following research-guiding question is posed: What potential does internal corporate Social Listening offer as a strategic approach for the corporate communication of groups and group-affiliated subsidiaries with a branch office in Germany? To answer this question, qualitative, partially standardized guided interviews were conducted with communication experts from twelve corporate groups or subsidiaries with branches in Germany. The study explores in detail how internal corporate Social Listening is used in corporate communication, to what extent it is integrated into the respective communication strategy, and what strengths and weaknesses it offers for corporate communication. The results suggest that internal corporate Social Listening can contribute to corporate value creation, especially in the context of reputation, issue and stakeholder relationship management. However, this potential has not been fully exploited, as the inbound dimension of corporate communication is still underestimated. Internal corporate Social Listening should be actively incorporated into a company‘s communication strategy.

Keywords: Social Listening, Internal Social Network, Internal Communication, Strategic Communication

1 Introduction

Nowadays, a company‘s actions are no longer tailored to the interests of just one stakeholder group, such as, for example, its shareholders. Instead, based on Freeman‘s stakeholder approach (2004) according to which companies cannot be considered independently from their socio-economic environment, it is essential to take into account a wide variety of stakeholders (Karmasin & Weder, 2014, p. 82). The employees of a company represent one of the most important stakeholder groups (Kirchgeorg & Springer, 2009, p. 210), which is why factors that strengthen said group’s satisfaction are increasingly becoming the focal point of corporate management. One of these factors is successful internal communication (Mishra, Boynton & Mishra, 2014, p. 184). While the most prominent role in shaping this is undoubtedly the sending of messages, one dimension is significantly underestimated: listening.

This deficit is also evident in the current state of research on the commonly named corporate listening, as studies have so far focused almost exclusively on communication impulses from the corporate environment (Borner & Zerfass, 2018; Ingenhoff, Borner, & Zerfaß, 2020; Macnamara 2020, Stewart & Arnold, 2018). Internal communication impulses, on the other hand, are strongly neglected in the research, even though the increasing adaptation of internal social networks makes more places for employees to exchange ideas available than ever before. In Germany, more than half of the 500 companies with the highest revenues already started implementing internal social networks in 2017, and they were implemented in 90 percent of Fortune’s 500 companies as early as 2014 (Sievert & Scholz, 2017, p. 896). In the near future, the design of internal communication will continue to be largely determined by internal social networks (Sievert & Scholz, 2017, p. 902).

By focusing on listening to communication on internal social networks, companies could open up a variety of value-adding opportunities (Ingenhoff et al., 2020, p. 15; Sievert & Scholz, 2017, p. 894). For a comprehensive, practical understanding of the extent to which communication departments can benefit from listening on internal social network media, the concept of *internal corporate Social Listening* will be introduced over the course of the following definitions of internal social networks and existing listening terms. First, however, an overview of the relevant theoretical frame of reference will be provided, and key research findings and theoretical foundations on success factors and (effective) applications of listening will be presented. In addition, the following section highlights the strategic perspective on listening and the possible strengths and weaknesses of its application.

2 Theoretical Background

The following chapter describes the theoretical background on which this study is based. First, internal social network media and their technical possibilities are considered, from which the necessity of listening arises. Based on existing definitions, a working definition for internal corporate social listening is derived. This is followed by success factors and application examples of listening in corporate communications as well as the strategic use of listening. The chapter ends with the elaboration of strengths and weaknesses of listening and the systematic derivation of research questions from the state of research.

2.1 Internal (Social) Networks

As the channel with the widest reach, the intranet with its diverse applications represents a central instrument of internal communication (Bahrt, Böhm, Mann, Reuter & Schlesinger, 2021, p. 25). An intranet is a computer network that can be used to exchange data within an organization (Däbritz et al., 2020, p.135). Due to the increasingly interactive and collaborative elements implemented on intranet platforms, the social intranet emerged (Hirsch, 2012, p. 24). This is "an intranet enriched with social media functions, which enables, for example, options for commenting, creating wiki pages or finding experts based on topics" (Meier, Lütolf, & Schillerwein, 2015, p. 18). Overall, there are various ways of implementing social media in the internal communication processes of companies, which can be described as “social software, employee portals, business-to-employee portals, wikis or weblogs, enterprise social software platforms, intra-organizational electronic networks, and enterprise social networks“ (Büttner, 2015, p. 1820).

In addition to enabling dialog and feedback from the workforce, internal communication teams can use internal social networking media to authentically set topics and maintain direct contact with employees (Hirsch, 2012, p. 25). The platforms engage employees in increasingly digitized organizational frameworks and can contribute to their motivation (Ewing, Men, & O‘Neil, 2019, p. 126). Overall, they are among the most flexible and comprehensive corporate feedback systems (Kolb, 2012, p. 58). The behavior and attitudes of the workforce on certain topics can be made visible through internal social networks (Kolb, 2012, p. 58) and, as a result, internal social media platforms can also become trouble spots (Mast, 2014, p. 1137). Büttner (2015) furthermore shows that concerns about data protection can negatively influence employees‘ intentions to use said internal social media (p. 1821).

Against this background it becomes essential not only to moderate but also to listen to the dialog on internal social platforms (Hirsch, 2012, p. 25). Platforms with social functions and infrastructures were created specifically to listen and network (Macnamara, 2020, p. 12). Corporate communication must therefore take on the role of trend scouting and think across departments to exploit the innovative potential of internal social networks (Altenberger, Eisenkern & Schader, 2012, p. 172; Hirsch, 2012, p. 25).

2.2 Social Listening in Corporate Communications - A Definition of Terms

The term Social Listening originates from the marketing field and refers to the observation and analysis of user interactions in social network media, to identify product trends and potential customers (Rosenblatt, Curran & Treiber, 2018, p.

71). While Social Listening in marketing aims to promote sales medium term, the tool is used in corporate communication with the long-term goal of maintaining stakeholder relationships, as well as of identifying trends and issues in society (Macnamara, 2018, p. 5). Furthermore, Social Listening refers to the monitoring of media-mediated interactions, which needs to be distinguished from interpersonal listening in the context of face-to-face interactions (Crawford, 2009; Kotras, 2020; Stewart & Arnold, 2018).

Ewing et al. explicitly apply the notion of listening to the output of monitored internal organizational social media platforms to examine the impact of listening on employee engagement (2019, p. 111-112). This form of listening is also the focus of this paper. The listening term used by Ewing et al. (2019), as well as adjacent terms such as Organizational Listening (Macnamara, 2019), Corporate Listening (Macnamara, 2020; Zerfass & Sherzada, 2015), or Leader-centric Listening (Cardon, Huang & Power, 2019), however, are applied to different processes without definitional changes. Therefore it must be noted that the so far established terms do not describe the phenomenon examined in this paper with sufficient precision. For this reason, the term Internal Corporate Social Listening (CSL) is introduced in this study, which explicitly describes the targeted monitoring and analysis of communication impulses on internal corporate social network media. Internal corporate Social Listening thus directs the inbound perspective inward and places the focus of listening activities on internal communication impulses.

2.3 Effective Listening - Success Factors and Application

Macnamara conducted a transdisciplinary study, The Organizational Listening Project, to determine how, and how effectively organizations are listening (Macnamara, 2016). His findings show that listening on a large scale can no longer be done interpersonally. A lot of the data - mostly in text form - has to be gathered and analyzed using technology. He identifies eight success factors for effective Organizational Listening, realized in the "Architecture of Listening" (p. 162-163).

Ingenhoff et al. (2020) adopt measures for corporate listening from issues management. Surveys and monitoring serve the perception function of articulated impulses. In a second step, the large amounts of collected data can then be analyzed by “interpretation processes based on them, such as (media) content analyses, issues monitoring, network analyses, data mining, and Big Data applications“ (Ingenhoff et al., 2020, p. 5).

Among the research-related methods, analyses of surveys and interviews, content analyses, social network analyses, sample polls, analyses of behaviors, and the methodology of sense-making can be identified. Textual analysis is given a great deal of importance in exploring listening. To be able to analyze such data, automated applications and suitable software such as bots are needed. However, topics such as digital surveillance and algorithms deciding on “important“ and “unimportant“ information need to be critically reflected upon (Macnamara, 2019, p. 5196).

Overall, it can be noted that the comparatively small body of research on the specific communication phenomenon corporate listening already contains many concrete design recommendations for practice. However, Willis (2015) notes that organizations are still far from listening well, as they supervise rather than use data to understand their organization (p. 3). Recent studies also suggest that organizations have not yet practiced competent listening on social channels (Maben & Gearhart, 2018, p. 112).

2.4 Listening as a Part of Strategic Corporate Communication

Borner and Zerfass (2018) place the strategic mode of corporate listening in the inbound dimension in their research on corporate listening and corporate value. Embedded in corporate communication, they argue that strategic decisions are made about how many resources are invested in listening and messaging respectively. “This decision depends on the design of the communication function (emergent or functional) and the inbound orientation of the company (sensitive or insensitive)“ (Borner & Zerfass, 2018, p. 17). Flexible structures allow corporate listening to be conducted across departments, common processes are standardized, and interpersonal conversations are used as informal stimuli. The communication strategies are thereby dynamic and can be equally influenced by listening.

Ingenhoff et al. (2020) also view corporate listening as a sub-strategy of an overarching communication strategy designed to guarantee the most effective listening possible. The results of corporate listening processes are intended to flow into entrepreneurial decisions and the resources for this are consciously used to generate entrepreneurial value. The corporate listening strategy itself may be planned, “but it may well emerge from emergent practices, solidify, and then be legitimized by the management level“ (Ingenhoff et al., 2020, p. 5).

In research and practice, internal and external communication are seen as increasingly linked domains (Macnamara, 2020, p. 3). As a result, corporate listening must be carried out across departments. Authors of strategic approaches recommend guidelines for this purpose that allow situational decision-making and response (Borner & Zerfass, 2018; Ingenhoff et al., 2020). Possibilities of structuring the process can be drawn from the more researched issues management (Ingenhoff et al., 2020, p. 6). Empirically, little consideration is given to the strategic mode of corporate listening. Only slightly more than half of the communication departments surveyed in Europe had a dedicated listening strategy as a part of their communication strategy in 2015 (Zerfass et al., 2015, p. 52). The importance of corporate listening for corporate communications still needs to be emphasized to allow for a more strategic implementation of listening.

2.5 Strengths and Weaknesses of Listening

Regardless of the specific integration of listening into corporate communication, the literature indisputably reveals many strengths of listening, as well as some weaknesses that should be considered. Corporate listening can help capture trends and needs from the employees' perspective, through which the company can then again ultimately gain innovation potential (Borner & Zerfass, 2018, p. 19; Cardon et al., 2019, p. 19) and a better understanding of their employees, which in turn can lead to greater employee satisfaction, higher productivity, and lower turnover (Ingenhoff et al., 2020, p. 3; Johnston & Reed, 2017, p. 76-78; Macnamara, 2020, p. 393; Reed et al., 2016, p. 329). Intra-organizational influencers and social groups can also be identified, which in turn can be leveraged to better reach and connect employees on internal platforms and foster internal dialog (Ewing et al., 2019, p. 123). Cardon et al. also highlight that by addressing the concerns of the workforce, corporate culture can be strengthened and thus intangible corporate value can be created (2019, p. 19). Borner and Zerfass also show that Social Listening makes an important contribution to a company‘s value creation, arguing that it not only increases the company‘s tangible and intangible value but also expands its scope for action, which can again open up strategic development opportunities (2018, p. 18). Furthermore, Social Listening is considered an integral part of issues management in corporate communication. Within this framework, potential conflicts with company stakeholders can be identified at an early stage and even prevented (Borner & Zerfass, 2018, p. 14).

Providing sufficient resources for a structured listening process is seen as difficult in many cases. This is because dedicated listening requires both extensive human and financial resources (Crawford, 2009, p. 532-533; Macnamara, 2016, p. 157). In many cases, however, only a small portion of the annual budget is devoted to establishing workflows, technologies, and other resources for listening activities. Moreover, many companies mainly measure the quantitative output of their own communication activities, without analyzing the contributions from other stakeholders (Macnamara, 2016, p. 156). In this context, the desire for a sophisticated Social Listening tool is expressed: "We would like to use listening tools such as more sophisticated social media monitoring tools to track comments and public opinion on issues. But it is a trade-off on how much we can spend" (Macnamara, 2016, p. 158). Another challenge is related to the management acceptance of the process, as the sending, but not the capturing of communication impulses is still considered more important by the majority of companies (Zerfass & Sherzada, 2015, p. 305).

One further weakness of Social Listening is that only those impulses, which have reached a certain level of awareness, can be recorded (Ingenhoff et al., 2020, p. 4). Subconscious needs, then again, can only be captured through behavioral observation. Another problem is posed by employee self-censorship on internal social networking media. For various reasons, employees use so-called “self-censorship strategies“ such as temporarily or permanently not using corresponding media or writing exclusively positive posts (Madsen & Verhoeven, 2016). These diminish the authenticity of the posts. Building on this, Cardon et al. note that anonymization may help employees speak more sincerely about specific issues and problems within the organization (2019, p. 20).

2.6 Derivation of the Research Questions

It can be stated that listening – despite some challenges – can hold a great strategic added value for corporate communication. With the establishment of social intranets, the employees of a company in particular gain a stronger voice. Against this background, the following research question arises:

> *What potential does internal corporate Social Listening offer as a strategic approach for the corporate communication of groups and group-affiliated subsidiaries with a branch in Germany?*

In order to ultimately assess the potential of this specific form of listening, it is first necessary to clarify whether and in what way CSL is practiced in companies and whether the relevance of listening observed by the researchers is also noted by the communicators. This leads to the following first, subordinate research question:

RQ 1: How is internal corporate Social Listening applied in corporate communication?

It has been shown that insights and information from the listening process can generate previously unused value creation potential for the company. In this respect, the type of strategic integration of the CSL must be ascertained to finally be able to correctly classify potentials:

RQ 2: To what extent is internal corporate Social Listening integrated into the communication strategy of companies?

Several studies on listening in corporate communication reveal various strengths and weaknesses of the instrument. For the concrete application of internal corporate Social Listening, it should be clarified against this background which strengths and weaknesses those responsible are aware of:

RQ 3: What are the strengths and weaknesses of internal corporate Social Listening in corporate communication?

3 Methodology

In this explorative study, semi-standardized, qualitative interviews were conducted with employees of companies with a communication focus, who actively observe and analyze employee communication on internal social network media (Gläser & Laudel, 2010, p. 42). Specifically, this refers to employees who are involved in the strategic planning, organization, implementation, and monitoring of internal communication within the communication departments of corporate groups and affiliated companies in Germany. The selection of the method results from a lack of knowledge regarding the research subject of this specific form of listening.

For this purpose, the relevant research dimensions and the structuring of the interview guideline are based on the previously formulated research questions: the application of CSL, the integration of CSL into the communication strategy, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of CSL. The open-ended interviews allow for the interviewees to freely structure the main narrative. The interview questions refer to the named focal points in an orienting way. To answer the research questions, various experts were selected based on the principle of "theoretical sampling" (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Saar, 2014, p. 181), who fulfilled the following criteria:

Employees of companies that have a communication connection and actively observe and analyze the process of employee communication on internal social network media. The companies must be part of a group structure and have their location in Germany.

The restriction to companies within a group structure was made due to the required distinctive internal communication infrastructure. To ensure comparability among data protection laws and regulations on the processing of personal data, only German branches were chosen (Basic Data Protection Regulation, Federal Data Protection Act). By March 10th, 2021, a total of 86 experts with the above-mentioned characteristics had been contacted through various channels, and interviews were conducted with 12 of them (equalling a 14 percent success rate). The experts came from 9 different industry sectors and held various hierarchical positions in the communication departments of their companies, with a distribution of 9 women and 3 men (see table 1).

Company	Position
Pfizer Germany	Senior Manager Communication Corporate Affairs Germany
Daimler Group Services Berlin	Employee Corporate Communication
Automotive company (anonymized)	Corporate Communication Manager
Aviation company (anonymized)	Head of Internal Communication
Microsoft Germany GmbH	Trainee Corporate Communication
Otto Group	Communication Manager Cultural Change 4.0
Bosch Rexroth	Employee Corporate Communication
Deutsche Post DHL Group	Team Lead Digital Content
Utility vehicles company (anonymized)	Content Manager international Employee Communication
Nestlé Germany	Head of Internal Communication
Mobility company (anonymized)	Head of Employee and Executive Communication and Corporate Media
Software company (anonymized)	Employee Site Communication

Tab. 1: Sample description

The interviews were conducted over approximately 10 weeks, from January 7th until March 17th, 2021. With an average interview duration of 39.25 minutes, the interview material comprises a total of 7 hours and 51 minutes of audio material. Due to the Corona lockdown during the spring of 2021, all interviews were conducted online. The transcription followed Gläser and Laudel (2010) and Dresing and Pehl (2018). Only uttered word sequences were transcribed to be able to fully focus on content-related statements, prosodic features were deliberately neglected. The evaluation of the transcripts was carried out in a rule-guided and systematic manner with the help of a qualitative content analysis following Mayring (2010). Since the analysis was carried out with "MAXQDA2000", aspects of Kuckartz's content-structuring approach (2016, p. 97) specifically intended for this software, were used as a supplement.

A deductive analysis grid based on relevant previous literature and the interview guideline served as the basis for the categories of the content analysis (Gläser & Laudel, 2010, p. 204). The categories and subcategories were further developed, differentiated, or supplemented inductively over the course of the coding. Following the first complete trial coding, all categories and subcategories were again revised and selectively separated from each other, so that the existing material could be exhaustively mapped using the final category system in the following coding run. The coding carried out with the final category system was then checked again in a final run and, in individual cases, passages were recoded or removed.

Main Category	Subcategory
Personal Data	
Organizational Structure	
Social Network Media	Type, Structure and Use
Direct CSL	Monitoring, Discussion
Actors	Internal Actors, External Actors
Tools/Software	
Frequency of Use	Frequency of Monitoring, Frequency of Discussion
Planning/Goals of CSL	
Measures of Utilization	Immediate Response, Added Value for other Divisions
Control of Results	
Strengths	
Weaknesses	
Challenges	Organizational limitations, Data Protection, Representativeness of Content, Authenticity of Content
Outlook	

Tab. 2: Main categories and subcategories

At the end of the evaluation, there were a total of 30 categories, 16 of which were subcategories, and 894 recorded quotations (see table 2). The information obtained from the transcribed interviews was analyzed individually after the evaluation and then examined for intersections and differences (Lamneck & Krell, 2016, pp. 379-381).

4 Results

In this chapter, the twelve interviews are evaluated and results are presented. In particular, the tools, actors, types of social network media, monitoring, and discussion are in focus first. Subsequently, the results on the integration of CSL into the communication strategy are described. This is followed by a presentation of strengths and weaknesses of CSL, the results of the third research question.

4.1 Usage of Corporate Social Listening

To be able to go into more detail on the benefits of CSL for corporate communications, it is first necessary to look at internal social network media, as well as their use and structure, since these provide the working and data basis for the CSL process. Within the interviews, the experts report on various social network media they implemented. The focus here is on social intranet solutions from providers such as Jive, Sharepoint, Staffbase, or Facebook. The Microsoft solution Yammer is described most frequently. In addition, the experts report on app extensions to the social intranets.

Uses available to employees within the social intranets vary. Like buttons, comment sections, posting opportunities and group formations are described as possible by most experts. Furthermore the intranets are often used to provide information for everyday work within departments, to allow for the exchange of contact data and for general contact between employees.

Monitoring of the internal communication is carried out sporadically by the majority of companies, though it rarely follows a fixed process with clearly defined responsibilities. A smaller number of experts, however, reports a consistent monitoring process that is carried out regularly and according to a plan from within the department. These interviewees state that the observation can be carried out via the corresponding intranet solution. It is mostly carried out quantitatively based on previously defined key performance indicators (KPIs). The frequency of observation differs and is influenced by various factors, e.g., the existing reporting obligation.

Furthermore, there is also often only little systematic discussion of the information gained from the CSL process, although individual statements indicate a structured and regular procedure. Not only those directly responsible are included in the discussion, but also the department management. In principle, various topics of discussion can be gleaned from the expert interviews. The focus is on communication impulses, such as the question of reactions to comments. Analogous to monitoring, some companies regularly create space for discussion, while others attribute less importance to this. The time periods range from once a week to only annually. Overall, a discussion of the information occurs much more irregularly than monitoring.

Concerning the tools used in the CSL process, half of the experts denied the use of any software. Tools can be broken down into applications that are already part of the respective social intranet software solution, and of additional external software for further processing and graphical preparation of quantitative data.

CSL is implemented by various players. The interviewees most frequently refer to employees in internal communications. Other players involved are experts from the relevant departments or employees from the respective divisions, human relations departments, and employees from external corporate communications or service providers such as agencies.

Some companies have already expressed concrete plans for the further development of their respective CSL process. These include implementing technological support for the listening process and educating management. Overall, the interviews clearly show that many companies are striving for a professional approach to internal listening. For the majority of those interviewed, technological support plays a decisive role in this process.

4.2 Integration into the Communication Strategy

The second research question considered here was dedicated to the embedding of CSL in the communication strategy of the interviewed companies. Half of the interviewees mention that CSL is a part of an overarching strategy at their company. Here, CSL is connected to the general communication strategy, especially in the context of internal communication. Strategy and technological feasibility determine individual CSL measures. Planning marks the first step of a strategic application of CSL. This can be done, for example, using performance measures such as KPIs or objective and key results (OKRs). However, in some cases, there is no systematic planning behind implemented CSL processes or they are only planned for issues that are likely to be relevant and highly debated. The most frequently cited goal of CSL is topic identification. Interaction rates or outreach are identified as goals as well. Other aims include filtering out the mood in the workforce, promoting exchange, and showing appreciation to employees. Dissatisfaction is to be countered and change processes such as cultural change are to be driven forward, but CSL must not be misused to control behavior.

Through CSL processes obtained data serves as a basis for different communication measures. The most frequently named immediate reaction is the channeling of issues, problems, and suggestions observed in social intranets into internal communication measures such as articles, town hall agendas, and newsletters. CSL is also frequently used as an issue management tool that constantly accompanies communication processes to catch negative comments and emergent criticism on time, by permanently answering questions, responding to criticism, and, in rare cases, deleting comments. Measures like initiating virtual or face-to-face dialogs based on points of contact identified through CSL processes and the use of multipliers to increase the reach of internal communication were also mentioned. A second major part of the utilization measures is the distribution of the gained information to other business units. External communication has an interest in the identified topics because often these are trend or conflict subjects, to which an external relevance is attributed in addition to an internal value. Business units also benefit from the quick and direct employee feedback, which can be assessed based on CSL results: Specialist divisions benefit from the subject- and topic-specific questions and discussions, HR departments and managements are interested in the sentiment of the employees, and strategy departments, boards, and (project) managements benefit from access to informal feedback on strategy changes, project launches, and their progress.

Half of the companies surveyed do not formulate any statements on the monitoring of results. Only two companies mention that they carry out partial performance reviews. One company evaluates the previously set KPIs on a professional basis using a traffic light system. Another company also notes that performance reviews based on KPIs should be viewed critically. According to this, unpleasant topics do not receive as many likes as joyful ones. Therefore, a purely number-driven performance review should be treated with caution.

4.3 Strengths and Weaknesses

The majority of interviewees see a major strength in the aforementioned identification of relevant topics, which not only provide insights into employees' interests but can also reveal overarching trends in the entire industry. Number-driven listening in particular can provide a clear data basis for trends and support for decisions that were previously made based on the subjective gut feeling of those responsible. CSL offers the potential to reflect the mood of employees in the company and can thus serve as a substitute for internal company surveys. All interviewees consider the contributions and opinions expressed on internal social network media to be authentic. Critical contributions in particular are very common compared to external platforms. The clear majority of interviewees state that posts on internal social network media are made exclusively under the person's real name. With the help of CSL, it is also possible to show appreciation to employees and to receive feedback on the company's communicative work. The majority of the experts also identify the transfer of gained information to other areas of the company as a strength of CSL. Furthermore, the early identification of issues and the ability to react to potential problems at an early stage is perceived as a strength of CSL. Data protection in the context of their CSL does not play a serious role for almost all interviewees, as no personal data is collected.

In addition to numerous strengths, the experts also described some weaknesses of CSL. The lack of representativeness of the interactions on internal social network media and the associated low significance of the data obtained is seen as one weakness by some interviewees. Thus, it is mentioned that in most cases only a few interactions take place on the internal platforms and many of the posts come from a small, rather active group of employees. Four of the interviewees consider it more realistic that CSL can be used to identify only a tendency of the general opinion of the workforce. Employees therefore must generally be encouraged to be more active on internal social network media. In addition, negative dynamics can develop around critical issues, inhibiting and even preventing the expression of positive opinions. According to some interviewees, (quantitative) listening on internal platforms is not sufficient to reflect the overall tenor of the workforce and must be expanded, for example, through surveys. Above all, personal feedback in the form of conversations should additionally be obtained. Furthermore, the limited usefulness of the data obtained through CSL is pointed out. Not all figures collected are useful or helpful for capturing the overall mood within a company. In general, technological support for the CSL process is missed. It can be stated that a weakness of CSL is seen in its resource requirements in terms of budget, personnel, and working time. Against this background, it is pointed out that awareness of the importance of the tool must first be created. Another challenge mentioned by the interviewees is the possibility of employees‘ being afraid of being spied on.

5 Discussion

In this chapter, results are discussed against the backdrop of the existing research literature and condensed into hypotheses.

5.1 Interpretation of the Usage of Corporate Social Listening

The increase in the relevance of social intranets as described by Bahrt et al. (2021) can be confirmed by the results generated within this study. The application basis for the use of CSL is provided by the use of social intranets for all respondents. There is no uniform design. The attempt to merge data management, knowledge management, or even the networking of employees into one or a few platforms, as described by Beimel and Gonsior (2018), is made. In addition, the functional diversity of social intranets is striking. They serve as a feedback channel and enable the move to real dialog, as described by Hirsch (2012). However, this is not desired by all companies. The experts report that management is sceptical about giving too much weight to the voice of individual employees and work councils as well as compliance with data protection guidelines. They thus echo concerns raised by Büttner (2015).

The findings fundamentally suggest that social intranets enable employee listening and networking (see Macnamara, 2020). Furthermore, organizations have recognized the need for regular listening on internal social networking media. It is, however, equally clear that the listening process has only rarely been professionalized.

This is supported by Willis (2015) and Maben and Gearhart (2018). Listening can only be considered a professionalized process when consistent, structured performance can be ensured independently from individuals. This professionalism cannot be demonstrated in the entirety of the interviews.

The discussion of aggregated information occurs less frequently than monitoring processes and correlates with its application. Quantitative information is often collected in the context of listening, while qualitative information is collected less frequently. These findings are consistent with Macnamara's (2016) results that quantitative evaluation using KPIs is much more common than qualitative evaluation of communication stimuli.

The interviews also show that the professionalization of the CSL process is hampered by a lack of software. At the same time, conversely, the low use of professional CSL conditions the lack of appropriate technological solutions. CSL is often located in internal communication, but there are also interfaces with other departments. Here, the first approaches to the cross-sectional function of corporate listening can be found by Ingenhoff et al. (2020). External service providers for CSL are also mentioned, but their usefulness is questioned by Crawford (2009). Employees and departmental experts are often brought in after a listening process for further content creation, idea input, and queries. According to Altenberger et al. (2012), this makes it possible to exploit the innovation potential of internal social network media.

Overall, it can be stated that the information collected from the interviews in this study is consistent with findings and opinions in the relevant literature. This study, however, also shows that not all of these findings are transferred to German corporate communication practice. This suggests that despite relevant research findings, the relevance and potential of listening are not recognized. Against this background, the following hypothesis subsequently needs to be verified in future research:

> *H1:* The more professionally internal CSL is conducted, the greater the attributed relevance with regard to listening across the entire company.

5.2 Interpretation of the Integration into the Communication Strategy

The results of the interviews support an increasingly strategic approach to CSL, which is integrated into communication strategies (Ingenhoff et al., 2020). Since all but one company encountered CSL strategically – recognizable through explained plans and pursued goals in the interviews – it can be assumed that the topic of listening has received more attention in companies since Zerfass and Sherzada‘s (2015) survey. Nevertheless, only half of the interviewees talk about planning the processes along the lines of communication strategy. Objectives such as identifying topics and mapping the mood of employees were evidenced in the survey (Crawford, 2009; Ewing et al., 2019; Ingenhoff et al., 2020). Other goals mentioned in the relevant literature, such as the promotion of feedback and exchange, as well as showing appreciation towards employees, can also be found in the research results (Borner & Zerfass, 2018; Kolb, 2012).

The findings on the operational implementation of direct follow-up measures by immediately involved actors also support the central outcomes of previous studies. It can be confirmed that the strategic linking of issues management processes and corporate listening proposed by Ingenhoff et al. (2020) is of great advantage for communications departments, for internal listening. However, it also becomes apparent that this has so far only rarely been undertaken in the course of the generally inadequately developed listening strategies. Nevertheless, the time-consuming monitoring and interpretation processes would already be worthwhile, as they allow for derivation of communication follow-up measures tailored specifically towards target groups, which in turn promotes exchange with employees due to their dialogic character (Ingenhoff et al., 2020). Technological professionalization could significantly accelerate the time-consuming processes. Considering the added value of CSL for other business units, the results replicate Macnamara‘s assessment (2020) that a separation between external and internal listening limits the horizon of opinion that can be observed by communication departments. Even though internal and external stakeholders assess topics differently in terms of relevance due to different interests, the results show that internally observed trend and conflict topics are relevant for external target groups in most cases. CSL can therefore serve as a reliable topic radar, enabling companies to establish competitive advantages over time compared to companies without CSL. Since the identification of topics described above is successful in practice without cross-departmental CSL planning and implementation, the previous assumption that corporate listening must be organized cross-departmentally cannot be confirmed (Ingenhoff et al, 2020). One aspect that should definitely be organized on a cross-departmental basis, however – and these results support previous assumptions – is the employee dialog in the course of issues management and the forwarding of CSL results, because in addition to internal communication, business units and management can benefit most from receiving feedback from outside their division.

The monitoring of the results of listening processes has not yet been addressed neither in the relevant literature, nor in most companies. However, since the control of the previously set goals is a component of classic strategy processes, it can be assumed that this will find its way into the practice of companies with a further professionalization of CSL. Based on the previously discussed results, the following hypothesis emerges for follow-up research:

> *H2:* The more comprehensively CSL is embedded in the communications strategy, the more efficient the exploitation of results and subsequent monitoring of success will be.

5.3 Interpretation of Strengths and Weaknesses

The present research can confirm the findings of earlier studies regarding the added value of Social Listening in the context of internal corporate communications (see chapter 2). As already recognized by Ingenhoff et al. (2020), in addition to internal and external corporate communication departments, other corporate divisions can benefit from the data obtained. Kolb (2012) states that internal social network media can increase the feeling of appreciation and, consequently, employee satisfaction. Contrary to this, this is mentioned by only one expert in the context of this study. It should be pointed out, however, that the interest in the employees' opinions, which forms the basis of CSL, indicates such appreciation.

Although concerns about data privacy on internal social network media are expressed in the literature (Büttner, 2015), the interviewees in the given research project put this assessment into perspective. This can be explained by the data protection-compliant handling of the observation and exploitation of employee interactions taking place on the platforms (see chapter 4). Only the collection, transfer, or further use of personal data over the course of CSL processes can become problematic.

Similar to Macnamara (2016) and Crawford (2009), the present study concludes that certain resources such as personnel, working time, or tools must be made available on the part of the companies, or a certain infrastructure must be in place for CSL processes to be effectively operationalized and utilized. The technical support already called for by Macnamara (2016) continues to represent an unfulfilled ideal with which not only quantitative but also qualitative interactions on internal social network media could be monitored and evaluated more effectively. Both the interviewees and Zerfass and Sherzada (2015) see the reason for the lack of resources in the lack of awareness of the relevance of CSL on the part of the respective management. There is still a need for education here.

The communication experts interviewed perceive the majority of employee contributions as authentic. In contrast, Madsen & Verhoeven (2016) argue that the use of clear names could lead to employees behaving differently on internal platforms than on private, external network media. Such a conclusion would also be supported by the assessment of Cardon et al. (2019), who see anonymizing posts as a way to reduce employees‘ inhibitions about voicing certain concerns and problems within the organization. Respondents‘ beliefs regarding the authenticity of observable contributions must be critically questioned in the context of these research findings. Last but not least, it is evident from the results of this study that no concerns are expressed on the part of communication experts about the fact that no subconscious needs, but only consciously articulated concerns can be identified through CSL (Ingenhoff et al., 2020).

The present study gave way to new insights concerning the representativeness of the content of the communication impulses captured by CSL, which has not extensively been explored in previous studies. The research results allow for the assessment that, in most cases, the observed interactions are exercised by a small, above-average active group of users within the organization. As a result, the representativeness of the data collected through CSL is often considered to be low. Madsen and Verhoeven (2016) identify inhibitions and trends toward self-censorship by employees on internal social platforms as the reason for this. In general, the following thesis can be put forward with regard to the representativeness of employee contributions in terms of content:

> *H3:* The higher the number of active users on internal social networking media, the more CSL‘s strengths can be leveraged.

6 Limitations

The present study is based on a mono-methodical, qualitative research design. Although the transferability of the results was strengthened by adhering to the quality criteria (see chapter 3), the results presented here can only be related to the population with extreme caution (Lewis, Ritchie, Ormston & Morrell, 2013, p. 248).

The sampling of the present study must also be critically reflected upon. The decision to use a qualitative approach is always accompanied by comparatively small samples, but a higher number of cases would still have been desirable. The aim was to achieve maximum variation in terms of sectors, positions, and interviewees. A lack of comparability in terms of company size, number of employees, turnover, or similar factors was therefore consciously accepted (see chapter 3). Quantitative research would have to clarify whether these parameters influence listening.

Further limitations of the study are due to the chosen method of partially guided interviews. Numerous interview effects can influence respondents‘ answers (Brosius, Koschel & Haas, 2016, pp. 129-131). Although the interviews were guided, they are not uniform. (Häder, 2019, pp. 234-244). Conducting the interviews by telephone entailed further limitations: e.g., facial expressions and body language could not be perceived.

Furthermore, the present work must be critically reflected upon against the background of the novel topic and the accompanying conceptual ambiguities. Furthermore, sensitive topics were addressed, such as the handling of data protection issues or the strategic integration of listening in the context of corporate communications. In this context, it can be assumed that corresponding passages may not have been answered comprehensively by the respondents.

The research project was conducted as a group. It should be borne in mind that the individuals have had different experiences with conducting research on their previous educational paths. Through deliberate rotation, thought patterns and experiences were redistributed in order to achieve the greatest possible intersubjective comprehensibility.

7 Conclusion

For research question I, it can be stated that internal corporate Social Listening is primarily used in social intranets. The listening process is often carried out with the help of the intranets' board software by actors in the field of internal communication. The majority of the companies surveyed use internal corporate Social Listening regularly, but the process is not very professionalized.

Research question II shows that rough strategic goals are defined by those responsible for implementing internal listening, thus enabling CSL to be linked to communication strategy. Frequently, the formulation of objectives is kept very vague and an explicit internal listening strategy is not pursued by any of the companies, although a listening strategy would not only bring about a general improvement in the communicative follow-up measures and more effective handling of issues but would also make it possible to monitor the success of the processes.

Research question III addresses the strengths and weaknesses of CSL. Strengths include early identification of issues and trends, capturing trends in the company‘s sentiment, feedback of work, and dissemination of information to other areas of the company. However, due to the low representativeness of the interactions on internal network media, the limited usefulness of the data must be emphasized as a weakness. For this reason, (number-driven) listening alone is not sufficient for capturing the overall sentiment in the company. In addition to resources such as budget, working time, skilled personnel, and technological support, there is often a lack of understanding of the potentials or professionalization of CSL.

From the previous three research questions, the answer to the guiding research question can be derived. The strengths offered by CSL have already been emphasized several times. Accordingly, CSL is able to influence the success of a company. Especially in the context of reputation and issues management as well as stakeholder relationship management, it makes a relevant contribution to the overall corporate value creation. Empirically, strong indications were found that the potential of CSL is not being fully exploited. In summary, it is also clear that CSL is extremely valuable for obtaining an impression of the mood within the workforce. However, it cannot and should not replace other methods such as opinion surveys. Rather, it offers the possibility of integrating other instruments with the same or similar objectives. In this respect, CSL can provide the foundation for a trusting and dialogic communication culture at eye level.

For future research, it can be deduced from the findings in the literature as well as from this study that the strategic mode of listening has not been sufficiently considered so far. In education, communication should be taught more as a dialog. In this way, a new generation of young professionals learns the relevance of listening. In practice, it became apparent that internal CSL has not yet drawn on the comprehensive findings of research such as Macnamara's Architecture of Listening (see chapter 2). The use of social intranets should be encouraged in organizations to address the weakness of lack of representativeness. With representative use and authentic interactions, listening insights could gain validity. In addition, awareness should be created that CSL requires resources such as budget, time, and personnel.

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YOUR CAR, MY CONTENT, OUR POST

Strategic Communication Using Prosumers in Shared Mobility

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Abstract

The scarcity of resources is a central challenge of the 21st century. Companies, therefore, rely on innovative and sustainable business models. For example, shared mobility is a booming sector of the sharing economy experiencing a high competitive pressure among suppliers. A concrete solution to survive in the market is to integrate prosumers more closely into corporate communication activities. Hence, this work examines to what extent communication experts of shared mobility companies use prosumers for strategic corporate communication to date. For this purpose, guided expert interviews were conducted. Knowledge about the utilized tools and channels, requirements as well as existing standardized processes with regard to communication with and via prosumers was gained. The results confirm that prosumers are used in the strategic communication of shared mobility companies, but their potential is insufficiently exploited. The measures used in dealing with prosumers do not differ from those used for other multipliers. Nevertheless, it is clear that a stronger professionalization of the practice can strengthen stakeholder loyalty and thus secure long-term company success. In addition, best practices were identified and recommendations for action were made.

Keywords: prosuming, sharing economy, shared mobility, strategic communication, trust

1 Introduction

Building up trust between companies and their stakeholders is a central objective of strategic communication (Bentele & Seidenglanz, 2008, p. 49). To achieve this, many companies use social media influencers as authentic and credible multipliers (Enke & Borchers, 2019, p. 264). When it comes to the shared economy, in which trust is a particularly important success factor (Hawlitschek et al., 2016, p. 27), another group of stakeholders reveals new potentials to support the communications' trust-building function: prosumers.

As a portmanteau of the words producer and consumer, the term prosumer refers to a group of stakeholders that is not only consuming a product or service but is actively involved in its value chain (Toffler, 1980, pp. 282-285). Since communicative activities are also part of the value creation process (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 502), prosuming includes communication about the company's products or services on social media.

Although prosumers have great potential for use in strategic communication, there have been hardly any publications on the subject to date. Marketing theory studies examine the practical relevance and use of prosumers (Lang et al., 2020b), but they do not consider their strategic integration into corporate communications (Dellaert, 2019; Eckhardt et al., 2019).

Concerning the sharing economy, Costello and Reczek (2020) as well as Lang et al. (2020a) highlight the existence and benefits of prosumers from a business perspective. Thus, in terms of communication science, the use of prosumers in the corporate communication of shared mobility companies offers a broad field of research that requires fundamental stocktaking.

Therefore, this study investigates to what extent communicators of shared mobility companies in the German B2C market use prosumers for strategic corporate communications. By researching established tools and channels, exploring the requirements companies have for prosumers and their content, structuring existing standardized processes, and looking at the prospectively planned use of prosumers, existing best practices will be identified and recommendations for practice will be made.

To answer the above-mentioned question, guided expert interviews with 12 communication experts from shared mobility companies in Germany were conducted. The data was collected and analyzed using a qualitative content analysis according to Kuckartz (2014).

Overall, this study provides an overview of the use of prosumers in the corporate communication of sharing economy companies. While discussing the strategic communication of shared mobility companies, a special focus will be placed on the construct of trust, which will be considered both in terms of its influence on the success of the sharing economy and with regard to the use of prosumers and their content. Furthermore, the stakeholder orientation as a bridge between the use of prosumers and trust-building measures in corporate communication will be examined in more detail.

2 Prosumers in the Corporate Communication of Shared Mobility Companies

More and more creators and companies provide content and services very cheaply or even for free, and emerging business models are taking advantage of this opportunity. Hybrids formed from the established capitalist economic system and collaborative commons (Rifkin, 2014, p. 7) have established a new industry: the sharing economy. These businesses are based on the concept of sharing instead of owning, as well as on the integration of prosumers into corporate (communication) activities – in contrast to traditional business models which place the consumers at the end of the value chain.

Prosumers are the central actors in this post-industrial age (Toffler, 1980, p. 282-285) and increasingly replace the passive role of the consumer (Kotler, 1986, p. 510).

Prosuming takes place complementary to the sphere of gainful employment and follows the pre-industrial logic of production for the purpose of self-consumption (Toffler, 1980, p. 282-285). It attacks the aspect of productivity inherent in consumption (Ritzer, 2014, p. 10). Prosumers are therefore customers actively involved in the production process and thus in the value chain (Kleemann et al., 2008, p. 8).

The twofold role of prosumers is interdependent with other prosumers within a system or business model, who cooperatively exchange (in)tangible resources for mutual benefit and profit (Jenkins et al., 2006, p. 3), such as the sharing economy. In addition, there are other concepts such as the *working customer* (Rieder & Voß, 2013, p. 177) or *productive consumption* (Laughey, 2010, p. 107). New hybrid terms as mentioned by Bruns (2008) such as *produser* (p. 266) and *co-creator* (p. 341) have now entered academic usage to emphasize the increased production capabilities of users. The fact that so many different terms exist is evidence for the increasing interest and relevance of the prosuming phenomenon. The reason for the increase in importance in recent years (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010, p. 16) is the close connection to the so-called user-generated content (UGC) (Bickart & Schindler, 2001, p. 33; Popek, 2010, p. 4).

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2007, p. 8), UGC must meet three basic requirements: First of all, content must be published on either a publicly accessible website or a social network where it mostly influences and describes products in terms of individual usage situations and evaluates product performance based on personal experience. Secondly, it must show some level of creative effort, and finally, it must have originated outside of professional routines and practices (Bickart & Schindler, 2001, p. 18). Therefore, the product of prosumers‘ actions is UGC in a narrow sense with regard to the inclusion of prosumers in the value chain. Business models based on prosuming use UGC in broader contexts. Compared to traditional media, the use of UGC is shown to be more effective in attracting new customers (You & Joshi, 2020, p. 228). It should be used in combination with the company‘s own media products to enable an optimized integrated marketing communication (You & Joshi, 2020, p. 228). This way, prosumers become opinion leaders and potential tools for new customer acquisition (Trusov et al., 2009, p. 93).

Although a rising number of companies recognize prosumers as a strategic advantage (Martínez-Sala et al., 2018, p. 151; Tapscott & Williams, 2006, p. 128), current studies on the topic remain sparse. Much of the literature focuses exclusively on either consumers (Böcker & Meelen, 2017, p. 28; Edbring et al., 2016, p. 5; Neunhöffer & Teubner, 2018, p. 221) or producers (Hawlitschek et al., 2016, p. 26; Karlsson & Dolnicar, 2016, p. 159; Schreiner et al., 2018, p. 366), whereas only a few deal with the direct interaction of both groups (Dellaert, 2019, p. 238) or with prosumers themselves (Lang et al., 2020a, p. 58; Martínez-Sala et al., 2018, p. 137).

However, research is increasingly devoted to consumers‘ attitudes toward user-generated content (Lee et al., 2017, p. 849) and the extent to which trust emerges in advertising as opposed to user-generated content (MacKinnon, 2012, p. 20). These effects are also prevalent in influencer marketing practices. Companies take advantage of the mostly high trust of buyers in online reviews and recommendations (Ventre & Kolbe, 2020, p. 293; Zhang et al., 2017, p. 7) as well as influencers as opinion leaders (Momtaz et al., 2011, p. 19) and multipliers (Enke & Borchers, 2019, p. 274).

The difference to the group of prosumers lies mainly in the size of the networks, however, “a high number of followers may not always translate into true influence“ (De Veirman et al., 2017, p. 813). Unlike prosumers, the business relationship between companies and influencers is also subject to a network of contracts (Sekara, 2018, p. 338). If a service is provided by an influencer, such as the creation and distribution of authentic posts on the social media channels of the influencer or the company (Enke & Borchers, 2019, p. 263), German law states that the influencer must receive payment or remuneration as agreed to in advance (Lehmann, 2017, p. 772).

When looking at all media producers, i.e. prosumers themselves, the potential created by media and technical developments has to be considered. It has never been easier to produce high-quality content in a short time and get in touch with companies: powerful cameras on cell phones are just one example of high-quality, yet cost-effective content production. Filters in social media and the widespread use of hashtags also make products easy to find, sort, and reproduce on the Internet. As already mentioned, cultivating prosumers is of particular importance for sharing economy companies, who can only use the network of their platforms with the greatest possible potential in this way.

> Transitioning to prosumers means that users become a manifestation of the sharing economy and its potential. In other words, the power to grow the sharing economy not only lies in increasing the overall population of providers and consumers, but also in the ability of platforms to convert one to the other by leveraging trust and gratitude (Lang et al., 2020a, p. 6).

In order to explore the use of prosumers in corporate communication, the focus of this paper is deliberately placed on the sharing economy, as prosumers are an integral part of the business model (Oermann, 2015, p. 116). If, for example, drivers of the car sharing company FREE NOW Ride make their private vehicles available, they are both producers and consumers of the service. On a less conventional level, employees of sharing services can also belong to the group of prosumers if they are simultaneously users of the service. If we extend the concept of prosumers to the entire value chain, as explained in the previously, communication is also part of the enrichment of a service: If users communicate about an offer in the form of UGC, they contribute to the value chain and can therefore be described as prosumers.

3 The Economy of Sharing

Sharing instead of owning – that is the fundamental principle of the sharing economy. Martin Weitzman, one of the first economists to deal with the "share economy" (1984), coined the term in the context of employee profit-sharing as a solution to the then persistent inflation.

Over time, the sharing economy's business model has created an alternative to traditional ownership concepts. At its core, the sharing economy describes "collaborative consumption made by the activities of sharing, exchanging, and rental of resources without owning the goods‘‘ (Lessig, 2008, p. 143). These goods can be tangible such as money, space, or tools, but also intangible resources such as time, ideas, and knowledge (Bouncken & Reuschl, 2018, p. 322; Kathan et al., 2016, p. 663). The goal of the sharing economy is to increase wealth for all market participants (Kreutzer & Land, 2017, p. 245).

One of the most important drivers of the sharing economy were the new technical possibilities of the Internet: technological achievements like electronic payment as well as communication and information access via smartphone, laptop, or tablets fostered a new form of market and exchange economy, which can be handled via online platforms (Hira & Reilly, 2014, p. 176).

The various business models of the sharing economy can be sectioned into three different types (Petrini et al., 2017, p. 45). In *product-service systems*, the benefits of a product can be used without the necessity of becoming the owner of this product. Products or services are professionally mediated or offered and usually sold via corresponding online platforms. With the help of *redistribution markets*, objects that became obsolete in one place are transferred to another place where they can be used again (Rinne, 2013, p. 7).

Models for a *collaborative lifestyle* refer to the non-commercial collaborative consumption of products or services that are not offered through a company with the aim of making profit. Instead, they are shared exclusively within a community (Shaheen & Cohen, 2013, p. 2), for example, when a car or intangible goods such as skills or experiences are neighborly shared (Rinne, 2013, p. 7).

In addition, sharing economy offerings can be differentiated along their business relationships: these include peer-to-peer (P2P), business-to-consumer (B2C), and business-to-business (B2B) concepts (Rinne, 2013, p. 9).

In the B2C concept, which will be the focus of this study, a company simultaneously owns the inventory and coordinates access to it for its customers (Rinne, 2013, p. 9). This form of sharing has enjoyed particular popularity in recent years, which is why more and more providers are entering the market (Steinmetz, 2019, p. 238).

Today, the sharing economy plays an essential role in our society as a rapidly growing industry (PricewaterhouseCoopers GmbH, 2018, para. 3). Rinne (2013, p. 9) groups the commodities of the sharing economy into *services* (e.g. Time Banks), *finance* (e.g. GoFundme), *entertainment* (e.g. Spotify), *accommodation* (e.g. AirBnB), *goods* (e.g. eBay Classifieds), and *transportation* (e.g. Uber).

This paper deals with the mobility sector of the sharing economy, the "Shared Mobility" (Laporte et al., 2015, p. 342). The increasing need for mobility is accompanied by the expansion of the transport infrastructure (BMVI, 2020, para. 2) and offers a correspondingly large market potential for alternative mobility concepts (BMWi, 2018, p. 11). In addition to station-based and free-floating car sharing services, this category also includes ridesharing and carpooling concepts, e.g. the online carpooling service BlaBlaCar. Furthermore, ride hailing companies such as FREE NOW Ride arrange professional rides from private individuals as a cost-effective alternative to cabs ("The Sharing Economy", 2013, para. 2). Even more efficient is the concept of ride pooling as with CleverShuttle and BerlKönig, where several passengers share a professional driver. In addition to motorized private transport, bicycles and electric scooters have become widely available means of transportation. The Shared Mobility Report by MOQO (2020) provides an overview of the industry and its various sharing offerings. In a so-called "Shared Mobility Diamond" (MOQO, 2020, p. 6), the report differentiates the individual shared mobility offerings into goods- and service-sharing concepts.

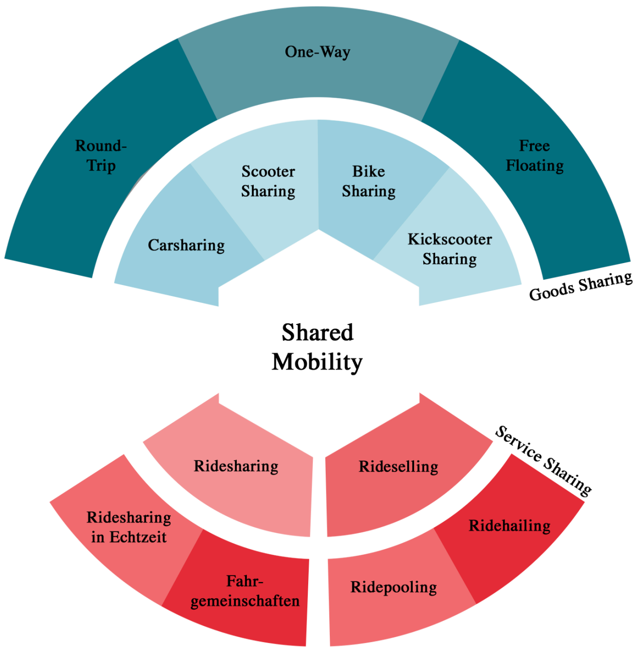

Figure 1: Shared Mobility Diamond from the Shared Mobility Status Report 2020 providing an overview of the market differentiation (MOQO, 2020, p. 6).

As the study by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy (BMWi, 2018, pp. 12-19) shows, the carsharing and ridesharing sectors are particularly expanding in Germany. Moreover, a study conducted by the automotive industry in 2017 forecasts a continued increase in the market volume of shared mobility "by a quarter annually between 2017 and 2030 to 1.3 billion euros" (Gelowicz, 2017, para. 3). In January 2021, car sharing companies in Germany alone recorded approximately 2.9 million registered new customers — a 25 percent increase over the previous year.

4 Strategic Communication of Shared Mobility Companies

Whether sharing offers are made or used depends on various influencing factors that must be thoroughly considered from a company perspective. While external influencing factors refer to the offer, the platform, and other social and political factors, user-related influencing factors include all motives that can be attributed to individual users (Georgi et al., 2019, p. 35).

The external influencing factor *communication and marketing*, which is the focus of the impact model, affects the user-related influencing factors, trust and *perceived benefit*. How a product or service is marketed or communicated can therefore also determine whether and how they are used and/or offered. A lack of knowledge and trust can accordingly lead to fewer users participating in the sharing experience. Following Hawlitschek et al. (2016, pp. 34–35), trust in the platform, in peers who also use the platform, and in the product's ability have significant influence on the decision of consumers to make use of the offer.

Additionally, aligning a company's communication with its stakeholders' interests is a key success factor (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 493). Following this view, prosumers can be seen as a separate stakeholder group, differing from customers as well as social media influencers (Enke & Borchers, 2019; Archer & Harrigan, 2016). Nevertheless, some parallels between multipliers such as journalists or influencers and prosumers can be identified regarding the goals intended by their use or involvement in corporate communications. Third-party reports by multipliers are used to overcome the perceived bias and create trust and credibility, which arises primarily from the authenticity of self-representation in social networks (Enke & Borchers, 2019, p. 266).

To gain the trust of potential customers in the platform, peers who also use the service, and product ability, companies rely on tools that are often directly integrated into the platform and its functionality. Online reviews offer the possibility to track previous experiences of other users (Zamani et al., 2019, p. 1950). Compared to quality certificates, for example, they are considered more useful because they reflect actual experiences of individual users (Cheng et al., 2019, pp. 372–374).

With regard to communication measures such as online reviews and quality ratings, prosumers play a decisive role as they help to build up trust, and therefore, the economic success of the company (Teubner & Dann, 2018, p. 2). In direct comparison to social media influencers, the use of prosumers is not diminished by the disadvantages of a visible contractual relationship and the associated growing lack of credibility (Du Plessis, 2017, p. 98).

In view of this potential, from a corporate perspective, the question to what extent prosumers are already being used in strategic communication arises. There are hardly any publications on the study of prosumers in corporate communication. Publications in related disciplines, such as marketing, tend to examine the practical relevance and use of prosumers only and thus focus on ways to motivate customers to become prosumers as well (Lang et al., 2020a, p. 6). However, these studies do not further elaborate on their strategic integration into the company‘s communication (Dellaert, 2019; Eckhardt et al., 2019).

From a communication science perspective, this opens up a broad field of research that should first be mapped out by a fundamental investigation of the use of prosumers in strategic corporate communication. The sharing economy is particularly suitable for this purpose since both the existence of prosumers and their strategic benefits for companies can be identified from a business perspective (Costello & Reczek, 2020, p. 24; Lang et al., 2020a, pp. 3–4).

Due to the paucity of literature and the scarce research, the integration of the research into already existing approaches proves itself to be difficult. Hence, the focus of this study rests on the exploratory investigation of the field, approaching the guiding research question:

"To what extent do communicators of shared mobility companies use prosumers in strategic corporate communication?"

To ensure precise operationalization, subordinate research questions including adjacent fields are derived, which make it possible to determine and investigate further relevant aspects.

> *RQ 1:* Which tools and channels are used when prosumers are engaged?
>
> *RQ 2:* What requirements do companies have for prosumers and their content to be used for strategic corporate communication?
>
> *RQ 3:* To what extent do standardized processes exist for the use of prosumers in strategic corporate communication?

Due to the industry often consisting of an exchange of resources between the parties involved via online platforms (Hira & Reilly, 2014, p. 175–176), the specific tools and channels of communication can be designated as a relevant influencing factor. Furthermore, as parallels between prosumer communication and the targeted use of social media influencers for communication activities exist, the definition of criteria or requirements for the selection of suitable influencers is particularly important (Enke & Borchers, 2019, p. 271). As a result of the assumption of these parallels between communication with and about prosumers or influencers, the question about management of contents and processes arises. Zerfass et al. (2018) conceive the management of corporate communication as communication management analogous to the management process (p. 502), while Enke and Borchers (2019) also formulate the process of managing social media influencer communication as a management process (p. 271).

5 Methodology

5.1 Qualitative research approach

This study is based on a qualitative and explorative approach to examine the hardly researched area of prosumers in strategic corporate communication of shared mobility companies. This methodology was chosen to inquire into the topic as exploratively as possible and adequately answer the research questions.

5.2 Data collection

Guided interviews with experts were performed as a data collection instrument to acquire, secure, and compare existing knowledge of the topic area (Bogner & Menz, 2018, p. 654). Interviews such as these should be conducted with performance role bearers from societal subareas, further referred to as experts (Meuser & Nagel, 2009). Relevant experts for this study were representatives of corporate communications, who already had experience with the use of prosumers and have the corresponding internal expertise. Due to their adaptability to the interview partners, guided expert interviews are particularly suitable for explorative data collection and advantageous for checking the validity of the information by asking individual follow-up questions, if necessary (Meuser & Nagel, 2009, p. 21). The interviewees thus also have the opportunity to proactively contribute their subjective experiences to the interview (Bogner & Menz, 2018, p. 655), which allows for a flexible approach to the different levels of experience in dealing with prosumers.

The sample (n=12) is based on a 2018 study by the BMWi (2018) and the Shared Mobility Status Report, which classifies shared mobility into its subsectors (MOQO, 2020). Except for one carpooling provider, which couldn’t be acquired in the process, all subsectors are represented in the sample which can be reviewed in the table below.

	Company	Position of the Interviewees
1	Anonymized	Marketing & Communications Manager
2	BerlKönig	Head of Marketing Transport Companies Berlin
3	BlaBlaCar	Community Relations Agent
4	Call a Bike	Specialist for Online Marketing
5	Clevershuttle	Spokes Person
6	FREE NOW	Senior Public Relations Manager
7	SHARE NOW	Team Lead Global Communications
8	Stadtmobil	Executive Board Member and Managing Director
9	stella	Corporate Communications and Public Relations Manager
10	teilAuto	Managing Director for Sales, Marketing & Finance
11	Voi	Communications Manager Region DACH
12	WIND Mobility	Policy & Communications Manager

Table 1: An overview of the participating companies (sample: n=12) and the positions of the interview partners.

Data collection took place between December 14, 2020 and March 23, 2021. The twelve guided expert interviews lasted between 25 and 75 minutes each and were conducted digitally in the form of video calls via Google Meets, Microsoft Teams, or Zoom.

5.3 Data analysis

In preparation of the subsequent data analysis, the audio recordings of the conducted interviews were fully transcribed. Based on Kuckartz (2014, pp. 37–64), a qualitative content analysis was conducted to analyze the interviews of this research. This data analysis approach proves to be most suitable, since the category system can be constantly adapted to the analysis material which makes the analysis of guided interviews more convenient. The following section is entirely based on his suggestions in this regard.

Following this analysis process model, the first step was to carefully examine the existing data material. In the second phase, thematic main categories were derived from the interview guide. To ensure research quality, short descriptions with anchor examples were created for each of the deductively derived categories, which served as a benchmark for the coders and subsequently ensured intercoder reliability. In addition, the derived themes as well as their definitions were reviewed for their suitability to the material. For this purpose, 25 percent of the entire material was pre-coded.

In the third phase of Kuckartz‘s process model the comprehensive material was coded for the first time. After the collection of uniformly coded text passages in the fourth phase, the next step was to inductively determine subcategories. In the sixth phase, the material was coded a second time based on the revised categories. The final coding process confirmed an accurate dimensionalization of the category system. All coded segments were tabulated by category at the end of the analysis process. The coding scheme is available upon request.

5.4 Ethics

Written information about the project was given to the participants prior to the data collection. All participants gave their consent and it was emphasized that the participation was voluntary. All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The option to fully anonymize the company and the interviewee was offered to ensure anonymity in case further publications result from the project. One participant made use of this option. All personal information, audio files and other materials were stored in accordance with the research privacy policy and deleted at the end of the project.

6 Results

The following chapter will focus on the results of the three research questions, which addressed (6.1) tools and channels, (6.2) requirements, and (6.3) standardized processes of prosumer content into strategic communications.

6.1 Tools & Channels

The first research question refers to tools and channels used to communicate content from or about prosumers within strategic corporate communication measures of shared mobility companies.

6.1.1 Tools

Overall, the tools used for organizing prosumer content do not differ from the already established tools of corporate communication, whereas some interviewed companies do not currently use any organizational tools at all. They rely on analog and intuitive organization of content instead. However, some specific tools for organizing and distributing prosumer content could be detected: For the internal processing of prosumer content, the editorial tool *Trello* as well as the social media management tools *Socialbakers* and *Hootsuite* are being used.

As an internal knowledge database, interviewees referred to the web-based *Google Docs Editors Suite* and *Google Drive*, in order to organize prosumer content across teams and to disseminate it via link sharing through third channels, such as e-mail. In addition, platforms for customer support such as *Zendesk* are used to collect, cluster and filter prosumer content thematically. Furthermore, hashtag search is a helpful tool function to quickly find thematically related posts on internal or external platforms.

6.1.2 Channels

The internal acquisition of prosumer content is mostly covered by the direct contact with colleagues, be it in a personal conversation, by phone, or in the context of (video) conferences in order to exchange ideas and implement possibilities. For the internal distribution, newsletters or internal wikis with an integrated newsfeed function are used to disseminate prosumer content. Non-official meetings help to distribute content as well, whereas the latter offer the advantages of entering a dialog. Some internal channels are utilized for both acquisition and distribution of prosumer content such as internal employee apps or the instant messaging tool Slack as well as email exchange. Via these channels, prosumer content can be easily acquired with the help of feedback surveys and call-to-actions, and subsequently shared internally.

External channels for acquiring prosumer content include direct communication via email or phone, or via instant messaging tools such as *WhatsApp* or *Telegram*. However, it is not necessarily the company itself that gets in contact with the prosumers via these channels, but sometimes third parties such as PR agencies.

The overlap between external acquisition and distribution channels becomes clear when having a look at the usage of social media platforms, including *Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram,* and *Twitter.* Regarding *Instagram*, the function of creating *stories,* in particular, offers prosumers the opportunity to link companies in their posts which, in turn, can be reposted by the companies themselves. Moreover, *Instagram, Facebook* and *Twitter* are suitable platforms for collecting customer feedback and stories through short surveys, although *Facebook* is increasingly losing relevance due to declining reach and data protection reasons. *Twitter,* on the other hand, is suitable for the distribution of prosumer content, for example in the form of an account *takeover*.

Distributing-only channels for external use are the video portal *YouTube*, the new audio-based social network app *Clubhouse*, or social media platforms like *LinkedIn*, which is primarily used for employer branding activities and the dissemination of business topics. Social media channels in general appear to be particularly suitable for disseminating prosumer content due to their speed and influence. Apart from that, newsletters or external blogs are rather used than the press in this context. Advertising media might be an alternative to include prosumer content in external communication efforts.

6.2 Requirements

The requirements that companies place on prosumers and their content in order to select them for their strategic corporate communication activities can be divided into demands on people and standards for content. However, these are usually only implicit and not recorded in writing.

6.2.1 Requirements for prosumers

Most companies do have requirements for prosumers as human individuals with specific characteristics. The communicators point out that, above all, a friendly appearance is a criterion for the selection of prosumers. In contrast, an overly unnatural appearance is rather undesirable. Furthermore, those prosumers who visually stand out from the crowd and appear interesting are of particular interest to the communicators. Factors such as age, gender, and cultural background should be represented as diversely as possible. The respondents want to counteract the image that only young and dynamic people use shared mobility by integrating prosumers of different demographics.

The interviewees attach great importance to prosumers matching the brand and external image. Employees as prosumers prove to be particularly suitable in that regard, since they are assumed to be in line with the corporate philosophy per se.

With regard to authenticity, it seems more credible when a company communicates with or about prosumers instead of just doing classic PR. It is especially beneficial for corporate communication when prosumers show themselves in their everyday lives. They are perceived as authentic if they radiate that they stand up for the service or the company. Furthermore, the essential personality traits and skills of a person are important criteria. One requirement is, for example, that the prosumers are able to present themselves in front of the camera. Thus, already in the selection process, attention is paid to who can be considered a *media personality* or a *voice of the company*.

In terms of reputation, people are not considered as prosumers for corporate communications if they take up positions in public that could harm the company‘s reputation. In contrast, personalities who enjoy a positive public perception are readily shown.

Prosumers who use the product or service above the average frequency are considered heavy users. The first point of contact with them is often social media. Their experience and recognition value should encourage potential users more effectively than new customers who are used as prosumers. In some cases, heavy users even offer to help out voluntarily. The companies reward them by offering discounts or even exemptions from contributions.

6.2.2 Content requirements

To fully capture which requirements need to be met by prosumers in order to be considered for the companies‘ strategic communication, a closer look needs to be taken at the prerequisites for their published content. For the most part, pictures and videos are shared, e.g. selfies. In addition, texts in the form of quotes and feedback are also relevant to reflect a balanced overall picture of the company. Depending on the communication channel, suitable and coordinated content is published in high quality, such as a high image resolution.

Special content is used in order to generate the attention of recipients and build trust. These are interesting stories standing out from the average and thus attract the attention of recipients. These include, for example, romantic experiences, unusual events such as a ride with an animal or a special bond with the sharing economy provider. Bizarre stories can be used to generate follow-up communication via word-of-mouth. Also, the entertainment value plays a decisive role for the use of prosumer content in strategic corporate communication. Often it is simply a matter of humorous contributions or the *meme factor*. In addition, it is important to the communicators that the content matches the tone of the other communication measures.

Special communication measures are carried out on holidays such as International Women‘s Day, Christmas and Easter. This also includes events organized by the company, for example anniversaries and content generated as part of sweepstakes or other marketing campaigns.

Content with a product reference is used preferentially, meaning that the product or service should be seen or described favorably in the prosumer content. In addition to bicycles, kick scooters, scooters, or cars, the focus also lays on the company‘s good service. This includes customer support as well as the handling and flexibility of the application and how prosumers evaluate this publicly.

The content provided by the prosumers must match the overarching values of a company, such as a lifestyle or the sustainability concept. Prosumers are expected to have already engaged with the brand. Further information about corporate values can be derived from criteria based on which content is rejected, e. g., content that shows forms of discrimination or the consumption of alcoholic beverages in road traffic.

In terms of the relevance of the content provided by prosumers, sharing economy companies focus on current events and overall social trends. These involve aspects such as the innovation of hydrogen as a driving force for cars amongst others. Specific feedback can be used to identify issues that are relevant to the company in the present or future.

In terms of content requirements and feedback contributing to the further development of product and service, constructive feedback is shared on social media channels, which is explicitly passed on by prosumers to other users. Complaints in the classic sense are explicitly not shared but only answered. Constructive feedback from prosumers is also shared internally, ensuring continuous improvement of the product and the service.

There is no guide or evaluation matrix for prosumer content. In summary, people and content must be consistent with the company‘s values to ensure a consistent image.

6.3 Standardized processes

Since communication with prosumers is subject to only a few regulations, there is also an overall lack of existing organizational processes. However, the interviewees mentioned the execution of a few isolated recurring campaigns to achieve more consistent prosumer communication. For these recurring formats, the regularity of communication as well as the frequency of embedding prosumers and their content in communicative measures of the companies should be examined, as both factors contribute to the standardization of processes.

Furthermore, restrictions and possible obstacles in the design or implementation of communication processes were investigated. For example, data protection-related restrictions potentially hinder or even prevent prosumer integration into communication. In terms of workload distribution, jobs tasked with editing and organizing prosumer content were not specifically assigned to a certain position, division or unit, but rather divided between communications, marketing, and or social media teams.

When it comes to processes related to prosumer content, existing standardized processes and sequential steps of communication of shared mobility providers could be identified. Firstly, acquisition of prosumers and their content can be achieved via direct calls, through PR, direct contact with potential prosumers, participatory campaigns or challenges, a company newsletter, or reactive acquisition. The latter usually refers to gathering information on social media through customer interactions via hashtag searches or social media monitoring and social listening. In some cases, additional incentives are advertised ahead of the interaction or during the course of acquisition. This, in interplay with the inherent sharing economy community spirit, creates an incentive to participate.

Secondly, to prepare the collected content for further distribution, editorial work is mostly done internally, sometimes utilizing existing tools and in individual cases supported by an external agency. Simultaneous collection of customer feedback as part of prosumer content has great potential and should be integrated in this step. During this evaluation process, maintaining authenticity of the selected contributions plays a central role. Furthermore, in the context of content analysis, key performance indicators (KPIs) such as reach, ad equivalent value (AVE), and tone, but also engagement were mentioned as the most important success and resonance measurement tools by the communicators. Overall, the interviewees share the impression that prosumer content in particular is very well perceived compared to more advertising-heavy content.

Finally, the commitment of prosumers to a company and thus the integration of prosumers into the value creation process was investigated. Through loyalty campaigns, exclusive events, and other forms of direct communication, retention can be reinforced. A company‘s recognition and gratitude for the created content, feedback, support or actions should be expressed in appreciative interaction with prosumers, for which these formats offer a valid platform.

In many of the interviews, it was recognized that prosumer communication wields great potential, but is far from reaching its full impact. The perception of the interviewed professionals is supported by the sporadic implementation of recurring processes in prosumer content management.

6.4 Implications for Future Research

Regarding the current state of research, there is a great need to reappraise prosumers and their suitability for corporate communication. Hence, companies need empirically based recommendations for action to successfully integrate prosumers into their strategic communication.

The present paper offers starting points for quantitative empirical research regarding the actual ability of companies to reach prosumers most effectively when choosing the right tools and channels. Furthermore, it stands to question if corresponding communication measures have an impact on the loyalty of users when companies did select prosumers to achieve the highest authenticity. In addition, it can be assumed that companies increase the influx of prosumers if they advance their acquisition measures through greater standardization of the processes. These assumptions lead to the following three hypotheses:

H1: Companies reach prosumers most effectively when they make use of social monitoring tools.

H2: Loyalty of users increases if companies select prosumers according to the main criterion of authenticity.

H3: Influx of prosumers increases if companies advance their acquisition measures through greater standardization of the process.

7 Discussion

The process dimension of prosumer communication proved to be one of the greatest challenges for the surveyed companies. Communication with and about prosumer content is characterized by intuitive action. Due to the novelty of the subject and therefore sparse research on the topics, there is little evidence for industry-wide standards. With regard to the definitional proximity, the processes for working with social media influencers can certainly be used as guidance in designing the workflow for ordinary social media users, i.e. prosumers. Thus, strategic prosumer communication could be designed as a management process along the phases of planning, organization, and controlling (Enke & Borchers, 2019, p. 270). This way, not only goals could be set and reviewed, but also an increase in trust towards the company could be better understood and strategically evaluated.

Some companies already possess internal strategies that are mainly based on reactive acquisition. These are, for example, based on hashtag searches to find and utilize all content that matches a predetermined pattern. They are to be generated in advance through targeted communicative measures. However, internal strategies also show a lack of strategic planning of these actions (Enke & Borchers, 2019, p. 271).

Diversity, a stereotypical norm appearance, as well as a breaking away from the norms were emphasized as criteria for content selection. This can, however, lead to an irregularity in the external presentation of the company, and subsequently to a diminished perceived authenticity of the measures. Nevertheless, authenticity of the prosumers was emphasized by most companies as an essential criterion. If this characteristic could be operationalized more clearly and tied to additional features, a similar catalog of requirements could be derived. In addition, companies can specifically control concrete requirements through their own calls and initiatives to generate content, such as recurring formats or events.

On the other hand, the lack of procedural cornerstones of prosumer communication also affects its regularity, since one must always rely on active acquisition by the company, time-intensive analysis, and selection of the content. In addition to these process-related problems, unclear competence structures and widely distributed responsibilities were often apparent within the business units. In smaller companies, this occurred mainly due to a smaller number of employees. In larger companies, however, additional hurdles, such as coordination difficulties, arose during implementation due to a lack of positions exclusively entrusted with prosumer communication. Still, the novelty of the field must be taken into account, although awareness of the necessary expansion and centralization of competencies rises.

Apart from this, the use of tools and channels could also be improved by such an advancement of the field, as currently no specific software can be found to structure prosumer connections. Establishing contact and interaction with prosumers primarily takes place in social networks. Therefore, the use of social media management tools for the organization and preparation of content is highly feasible.

However, the reactive mode of action proves to be problematic since monitoring or researching content can only take place after initiatives have been conducted. Nevertheless, the future viability of the topic and the positive response by customers and recipients to existing measures were emphasized above all.

7.1 Best Practices & Recommendations for Action

The search for prosumer-generated material through reactive acquisition can be seen as a starting point for further developments in the strategic sourcing of prosumer content. As a rule, companies carry out reactive acquisition, which can also be expanded to include an active component. This could lead to full exploitation of the potential of the acquisition of prosumable content which companies manage to generate targeted attention and content, i.e. through direct calls, personal contact, participatory campaigns, and corporate newsletters. Willingness to participate as a prosumer can be supported by additional incentives such as free goodies, bonuses, free usage of goods and services, loyalty campaigns, and multiplier meetings. Ideally, these measures are linked to specific hashtags or other searchable and filterable characteristics to make social monitoring as efficient as possible.

Regarding the type of content, authenticity plays a main role in the selection of prosumer material. It manifests itself in the voluntary documentation of the everyday life of prosumers. Most frequently mentioned as a requirement, communication experts are seemingly aware of its potential: authentic content encourages the effective generation of trust. De Veirmann et al. (2017, p. 813) also define authenticity as an important criterion to collaborate with and choose social media influencers. Since SMI are denied their independence due to monetary incentives and also considering strategic interest (Enke & Borchers, 2019, p. 266), authenticity plays an even more important role with prosumers. It is a decisive advantage, which must be maintained and leveraged for effective generation of true-to-life content. Nevertheless, other criteria should be developed and fixed in order to promote and encourage this type of content.

Furthermore, holistic planning integrated with other communication activities through tools such as Zendesk or Trello as well as subsequent coordinated distribution through e.g. Socialbakers or Hootsuite is shown to be suitable for aligning communication measures.

In order to coordinate the aforementioned steps of prosumer communication, a fundamental strategy is required to manage and control the standardized processes, requirement catalogs, and technical prerequisites jointly. This way, effective dealing with prosumers becomes possible and their extensive potential harnessed.

7.2 Future Perspectives

Communication experts generally expect the importance of prosumer content to increase. One reason for this is the change in consumer behavior with regard to social media use. Through increasingly democratized communication, more customers participate in the communication process. Prosumer content will be increasingly integrated in order to represent companies through likeable faces people can identify with. Authenticity plays an important role here. The lifestyle networks Tiktok and Instagram are becoming more popular and focus on people instead of corporate content. Consequently, more consumer-focused content from groups such as taxi drivers and passengers will emerge, as they interact directly with the product.

It will become increasingly difficult to work in strategic communication without showcasing employee or external prosumer voices, which have been proved as a very powerful tool. Moreover, a stronger sense of community, triggered by the community aspect of prosumer content, makes customers feel more responsible for the fleet in question.

As far as the quantity of usable material is concerned, the interviewed experts foresee an increasing influx, so that the topic will continue to occupy communications departments. In terms of response, the interviewees stated that prosumer content was much better received than regular posts. Individuals and customer groups should be involved in order to build credibility. This is the only way to maintain trust if prosumers expect to be an active part of communication in the future.

8 Limitations

Generally, conducting guided interviews with experts was an appropriate method of collecting data in the context of the intended research interest. However, reactivity, social desirability, and interview effects possibly tainted results as consequences of this methodological approach. Apart from that, the study cannot fully represent the population with regard to the scope of twelve expert interviews. Moreover, only experts from communications departments were selected as interview partners, with companies deciding independently who was ultimately chosen. Consequently, perspectives on prosumers in strategic communication may be preconceived.

In order to achieve reliable and valid results with six researchers, several measures were taken: Complete transcripts of the interview records, the joint development of a system of categories with the associated definitions and the technique of *consensual coding* to ensure intercoder agreement (Kuckartz, 2014, p. 74). Despite these efforts, there remains a residual risk of subjectivity during the coding process. In order to adhere to the validity of this research, the construct of prosumers was precisely defined in advance and delimited from related topics. Furthermore, the research questions were derived from the theoretical foundation, from which the test questions of the expert interviews emerged. In order to prevent misinterpretation of the term and misunderstandings during the interviews, the interviewed experts were provided with both definitions of key concepts and the guideline before their interview.

9 Conclusion

Sharing resources can make a significant contribution to curbing the culture of overproduction and thus proves to be forward-looking for ecological reasons. This is taken up by the business model of the sharing economy industry. Shared mobility, in particular, is experiencing a boom (Bundesverband CarSharing, 2021, para. 1). To remain competitive in the constantly growing market, service providers can add value to the company through strategic communication (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 502).

For shared mobility companies, the integration of prosumers – an integral part of the business model (Lang et al., 2020b, p. 178) – into corporate communication is an opportunity to optimize their value chain to increase user satisfaction and trust in the company (Eckardt et al., 2019, p. 9).

Although prosumers are used in the strategic communication of shared mobility companies, their potential is not sufficiently exploited. Neither tools nor channels specifically tailored to prosumers could be identified. The acquisition and distribution of prosumer content is done via the same communication tools that are used for other communication activities, especially in the area of social media. The shared mobility companies do not have specific catalogs of requirements for the use of prosumers. Nonetheless, the keywords *authenticity* and *trust* are particularly relevant in this context: The authentic external image of prosumers is used specifically in corporate communications to strengthen user trust. To achieve long-term success potential through the involvement of prosumers, shared mobility companies must consolidate and professionalize their acquisition measures. There are hardly any existing standardized processes in this regard. A significant reason for this could be the lack of awareness of the opportunities and potential of involving prosumers in strategic communication.

This initial review of the use of prosumers in corporate communications is intended to facilitate the transfer of findings into practice. Nevertheless, it should be kept in mind that this study is an initial exploration of the research field. Thus, it only represents a condensed section of the sharing economy industry. A starting point for further research could be to investigate whether the advantages of including prosumers in strategic communication identified by the companies in this study have the desired resonance on the user side. Investigating the actual amount of prosumer content that companies use in strategic communication also seems particularly informative in light of these findings.

The research also offers starting points for quantitative empirical studies: Do companies actually reach prosumers most effectively when they increase usage of social monitoring tools and hashtag searches? Do corresponding communication measures increase the loyalty of users if companies select their prosumers according to the main criterion of authenticity?

Overall, it can be stated that the surveyed communicators of shared mobility companies have an inkling of the potential of using prosumers in corporate communications, but are by no means using them across the board and only partially on a strategic basis. Finally, two things remain to be seen over the coming years. First, whether strategic activities from the corporate side will increase. Second, whether corresponding acquisition measures will be accepted and implemented on the less controllable prosumer side.

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In today's world, technological innovations and societal changes are increasing both in frequency as well as in the seriousness of their effects on all parts of our day-to-day life. With that, various institutions need to reconsider the rules they adhere to when handling a crisis or communicating with consumers. This book takes a look at the trends that are shaping the communication profession of tomorrow, within the fields of strategic communication and journalism, and their consequences as well as how to implement them. The publications given consider trends such as corporate podcasts, artificial intelligence in journalism, prosumers, and possibilities of fostering resilience and corporate social listening as well as effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on dialog communication. Six individual papers, developed over the course of a research seminar at Leipzig University, give insights into the future of communication within their respective fields, focusing on communication with, through, and as the recipient. Together, they formulate implications for the practical field and future research, offering insights and pathways for communication to come.